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THE TEMPTATIONS

AIN'T TOO PROUD TO BEG



MARK RIBOWSKY

AUTHOR OF *Signed, Sealed, and Delivered: The Soulful Journey of Stevie Wonder*



HEY ARE PURE Motown royalty and the most successful African-American recording group in history. During their long and brilliant run, the Temptations have sold twenty-five million records and produced seventeen Top 40 pop hits (four No. 1 hits), seventy-one Top 40 R&B hits (fourteen No. 1 hits), and fifty-two albums. And, like all royalty, they have had more than their share of triumphs, tragedies, and family feuds.

In *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*, *New York Times* Notable Book author Mark Ribowsky takes a cohesive and penetrating look at the enduring legacy of one of the greatest groups in popular music. He examines the lives of the Temptations' many members and takes you behind the scenes to discover the truth behind the major events of the group's Motown prime, from 1961 to 1974.

Ribowsky draws on in-depth research and probing new interviews with well-known Motown veterans, family members, and friends to create accurate and compelling portraits of complex, sometimes troubled—yet always talented—personalities. He traces the group's history from its pre-Motown years, through the glory days of "My Girl" and "Just My Imagination," to their pioneering and immensely popular early funk recordings, including "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" and "Cloud Nine." Venturing beyond the money and the fame, he tells a powerful true story of sometime allies, sometime rivals and reveals the unique push-and-pull, give-and-take dynamic that resulted in musical genius.

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The Troubled Lives
and Enduring Soul Of
THE TEMPTATIONS

Mark Ribowsky



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Acknowledgments

Compiling a saga such as that of the Temptations is something like squeezing a glob of Jell-O. The story never proceeds neatly in one cohesive direction; rather, some of it spreads here, bleeds there. As a big—make that *big*—sprawling pop-cultural panorama of American music, enterprise, and tragedy, it is interconnected with other plots and smaller sagas, especially since we're talking about that most storied of kingdoms, the black Camelot that was Motown. Nearly every Motown figure encountered along the path, luminary or otherwise, tells of having a book to write, each without doubt the best Motown story ever told. In truth, the Temptations story may be just that, because pilgrims such as these who soldiered beside the Tempts as they wound their way through five decades filled in the vibrant colors and subtle hues of this book with so much stark detail that the events they relate may as well have happened only last week.

For providing so much enlightenment and drama, I am grateful to, above all, Otis Williams, whose hard-earned reputation as one of the most gracious people in an industry of vipers was evident from the start of this project. Even after telling and retelling aspects of the Temptations story, he was as eager as I in making the story as complete as it could be for the sake of history, and to make it a success, all without any proprietary or monetary interest. No one has done more than this man to preserve not only the group but its original mission, and for that he is to be revered.

No less gracious was the only other living Temptation from the glory days, Dennis Edwards, a man about whom it has been said he's

just “too nice” to make it in this business. That he *has* made it this far given the troubled waters he’s had to traverse, and with his humility intact, is a tribute to the man and his golden voice. As with Otis, he stands as a model of how to survive the horrors of life without shedding an ounce of humility.

Although among all Temptations freaks there is a palpable sense of loss that David Ruffin, Eddie Kendricks, Paul Williams, and Melvin Franklin did not survive, I was truly fortunate that family members of these singular men were willing to shed light on them, most vividly Paul Williams’s younger brother Joe, who still grieves for him and tenaciously strives to keep his name alive. Providing trenchant observations about David Ruffin was his brother Jimmy, himself a onetime Motown star, and daughter Nedra, who has tried to defend the name of the father she barely knew. And for revealing some rather ugly truths about Melvin Franklin’s birth and paternal history, my heartfelt gratitude goes to “Momma” Rose Franklin, who relived painful events that she had tried putting out of her mind nearly all her life.

The nascent days of the Temptations, when everything seemed possible but very little attainable, came alive with the wonderful memories of James Crawford, who was a member of the group’s earliest configurations, and Richard Koloda, whose microfilm combings unearthed gems like the first newspaper story written about Kendricks and Paul Williams’s nascent group the Primes. And Maxine Ballard, sister of the cursed Supreme Florence Ballard, graciously provided a priceless photo of the Primes’ flashy manager Milt Jenkins.

I was honored to spend quality time with Mickey Stevenson, a man without whom Motown might never have gotten off the ground, such was his knack for signing talent like the Temptations. Just as sagacious was Shelly Berger, whose wise and steady hand guided the group to their biggest crossover successes in the late 1960s, and who remains the Temptations’ manager to this day.

A shout-out is in order for two men who spent more time with the Tempts and know more about them than anyone, guitarist Cornelius Grant and former road manager Don Foster. Thanks, guys, for spilling some juicy secrets. Another goes to Billy Wilson, who, while he wasn’t old enough to have run with the Tempts in their prime, got so tight with them later on when he became president of the Motown Alumni Association that he was able to offer some rollicking, no-B.S. revelations,

grisly as some were—particularly about Ruffin’s scarred childhood. (Not to mention those impossible-to-find phone numbers only Billy seems to know. Keep ’em coming, Billy.) Another phone number, the one that connected me to Dennis Edwards was provided, to my great joy and appreciation, by the Premier Radio Network’s golden-throated music maven Mike McCann.

For their help and direction, I thank two still fabulous Motown grandes dames, Janie Bradford, who cowrote the indelible “Money (That’s What I Want),” and Claudette Rogers, who was better known as Mrs. Smokey Robinson for twenty-seven years. Thanks also to Michael Sembello for some typically forthright anecdotes. And for setting the bar on Temptations recording information so high, the world should thank Harry Weinger, producer of 1994’s amazing Hip-O Select Temptations four-CD, six-and-a-half-hour *Emperors of Soul*. To a dedicated Temptations fanatic, the information contained therein—such as the exact musicians who played on every track on the album—isn’t just essential but the ultimate argument-settler of party trivia games.

A product not of Motown but rather Hoboken, New Jersey, this book owes its life and care for detail and accuracy to John Wiley senior editor Hana Lane, editorial assistant Ellen Wright, and production editor Rachel Meyers, as well as to my agent, Michael Dorr, president of the LitPub Ink literary agency, whom I thank for much support over a very long year.

Introduction

Somewhere at this very moment, on some stage in some auditorium in some province large or small, they're setting up for a Temptations gig. The Temptations in question may be one of two, or more—many more—groups that have through the years appropriated the cosmic name for fun and profit. It could, of course, be the *actual* Temptations, the most successful African American recording group in the history of mankind—or at least its lineal descendant by dint of the fact that its driving wheel is Otis Williams, the sole surviving member of the original group, who in the last half century has soldiered in twenty-seven different Temptations configurations with twenty-one other Temptations of varying authenticity. But it could just as easily be “The Temptations Review Featuring Dennis Edwards,” fronted by the belated Temptation who in 1968 replaced the spectacularly brilliant and even more spectacularly messed-up David Ruffin. At one time, Edwards too billed his unit the Temptations, leading Otis Williams—who fired him three times when he was in the real Temptations—to sue him for infringing on Williams's sacred copyright. In fact, Otis has initiated similar lawsuits to keep the name from other ersatz Temptations, leading to the formation of some loopy pseudo-Temptations permutations out there on the hustings, among them one led by someone whose life span with the group was two years.

As Otis will tell you, that thar gold reaped by the Temptations for selling twenty-five million records worldwide—the monetary reward

of seventeen Top 40 pop hits, four of them No. 1 hits, and fourteen No. 1 R&B hits—ain't fool's gold. And it's *his* gold, *his* brand, one carved into his domain by seventy-one Top 40 R&B records (more than anyone else) and fifty-two albums. The hardiness of the brand explains why men with the most tenuous connection to the Temptations will splay the name about on a stage, squeeze into a tight suit, and swing a hip joint for an hour. There's money in that name, and has been since the Johnson administration.

It's all our fault, really. We're suckers for a good song, and especially for a *damn* good song. In the real time of the 1960s and half of the 1970s, the Temptations witnessed the effect their *really* damn good songs had on people, all kinds of people, most everywhere there *were* people. Thus in the strict sense the Temptations—this one, that one, or the other one—are a tribute group. It's not, after all, as if most in their audiences don't know that four of the five "classic" Temptations are long in their graves. Still, because memories of the fallen remain so intense, there is a greater calling at work here. Think of the line Ruffin once sang in "I'm Losing You" about how he could "feel the presence of another man." Anyone old enough to have heard a Temptations song in real time will, with a certain ethereal haze, feel the presence of those five men upon hearing the same song today. It's as much about us as it is about them.

As long as it is *them*. It can be heard in Ruffin's open-wounded echoes in "My Girl," "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," "My Baby," "Since I Lost My Baby," "All I Need," "Beauty Is Only Skin Deep," and "I Wish It Would Rain." It emerges in Kendricks's tremulous falsetto trills on "The Way You Do the Things You Do," "Get Ready," "Just My Imagination," and the leads he swapped with Ruffin in "You're My Everything." And then there's Dennis Edwards's later gritty, fist-clenching lead turns on the proto-pop-funk of "Cloud Nine," "Runaway Child, Running Wild," "I Can't Get Next to You," "Ball of Confusion," "Psychedelic Shack," and the utterly amazing seven-minute magnum opus "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone." Otis's backing tenor will itself help recreate the perfect harmonic resonance of the midrange he once anchored with the tragically fated Paul Williams, and someone will reach way down to hold the bottom of the scale as did the superlative soul-deep bass man Melvin Franklin.

Those voices—those *attitudes*—were the fibrous core of what became, alternately, yearning paeans to the victories and agonies of

love and psychodramatic inner-city blues. They took form and flight with the lead vocal and magnificently fused chorus harmonies knitted to a soundstage constructed by incomparable studio musicians who had cut their teeth in the once thriving corridors of jazz and blues clubs on Detroit's decaying east side. The pounding, bass-heavy, sweaty, rhythmically hypnotic backbeats, lushly layered strings, and sweet and sour dollops of African- and Latin-style percussion created by those musicians all became standard elements of white pop. Later, the rhythms graduated to more free-form, funkier, jazzier idioms, expanding the potentialities of nonwhite pop.

At Motown, they called these consonants by the hard lines they made on a vinyl disc—*grooves*—and the Temptations' grooves were defined by Ruffin's unimaginably wounded voice. Had he sung the phone book, the effect would be that of a scalpel peeling away flesh and cutting right to the bone. Even now, after thousands of repetitions, hearing that voice implore, cajole—*beg*—on the right syllables of “I *know* you wanna leave me, but I *refuse* to let you go” or “If I have to *cry* to keep you, I don't mind weeping” makes body hair bristle. The admission that he “ain't too proud to beg” was more than obvious, but the first time it came, he suddenly turned accusing—“and you know it!” he spat, mocking and stepping over the sweetly supplicating chorus mewling “sweet darling” behind him.

This is what real emotion (read: soul) sounds like, what the heart sounds like if one is tortured enough; what real *men* sound like when their hearts and souls are broken, miring them in some middle ground between begging and berating. To crib from Ike and Tina Turner, the Tempts never, ever did anything nice and easy. They did it nice and rough—or, more harrowing, nice and *Ruff*, until he got *too* Ruff. Accordingly, what the Temptations sounded like—and, as importantly, what they *looked* like onstage—would seem to have been a bit threatening to white pop sensibilities and attendant fears, confirming, even mocking, the ugliest gargoyles of stereotyping. Except that they were so damn smooth. No, they were *smoooooth*.

This kind of thing does not happen by accident, or incidentally. It happens because certain people are chosen to do certain things at certain times. With the Temptations, these certain men could do many

certain things well. But not to be underestimated is the certain pain that brought out much of what they could do. It was no doubt more than incidental, for instance, that Ruffin happened to be tortured beyond the limits most humans could stand—limits that he himself couldn't stand, given his desperate instinct to hurt others, the historic proof being what his fists did to Tammi Terrell. But while the actual facts of the Ruffin-Terrell relationship cast that grim old story in a different, even grimmer light, one not entirely favorable to Terrell, it is beyond doubt that Ruffin hurt himself far more than he did anyone else. Similarly uncoincidental is that Paul Williams, a searingly tortured man himself, could sound nearly as scar-torn as Ruffin, though his bleeding vocals usually came in small doses. Ruffin's salve for his scarring was cocaine; Williams's was alcohol—too much for either one of them to be redeemed.

It was Otis who by his survival earned the right to tell the story through his eyes, first in his breezy 1988 memoir *Temptations*, and later as an invaluable asset to this work. One can say that Otis was simply better prepared for the long haul than anyone else. But then again, he never sang a lead on any important Temptations song, and never demanded to, wisely discerning that Ruffin, Kendricks, and later Edwards had the right stuff. Still, he was the one who had to take charge—hell, *someone* had to with a screwed-up crew like them. He was the one who had to swallow hard and ignore the huge potential downside in firing all three frontmen at one time or another—Ruffin twice, Edwards thrice. Such decisions required a cold, dictatorial hand. Ruffin once sneered at Otis during the salad days, “Ain't nobody comin' to see you, Otis,” and he was right, at least *then*. But *now*, of course, he is the only original they *can* come to see. As the Supremes, the Motown stablemates they always played second fiddle to, once famously sang, “It's a game of give and take,” and Otis played it best. After all, how many other geezers with tenuous or nonexistent connections to the hitmaking originals are still recording albums of new material that win critical huzzahs and Grammys? For the Tempts, that happened last a mere four years ago when they pulled in Best Traditional R&B Vocal for their cover of Marvin Gaye's “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You),” from their 2006 *Reflections* album.

• • •

The outline of the story is sketched in an unflinching if sometimes inaccurate Emmy-winning 1998 TV miniseries coproduced by Otis, the Temptations' longtime manager Shelly Berger, and Motown vice president Suzanne de Passe. And yet for a dedicated fan—and a nosy biographer with an urge for making the record historically complete and accurate—a good many gaps were left to be filled in, notably the failure to plumb the complicated roots of Ruffin's and Paul Williams's dual self-immolation. Indeed, as these pages will demonstrably show, the nature of the story is such that any embellishment actually makes it *less* compelling. Which is why there's not a drop of it here. Reality may be messier than the neatly folded melodrama, but without it we would never know exactly who and what the Temptations were, and are, in perpetuity. The true account is a parable of perfect music made by imperfect men, codependent on the direction and genius of other imperfect men, though in retrospect it always seemed that the best and worst of the Temptations were predetermined at the baseline level by fate; or, in the Otis Williams version, by "the hand of God."

A brief note of clarification is in order up front about the role Otis Williams played in the actualization of this book. Because Otis is an "official" contributor, one should not infer that the narrative is slanted even one degree in his direction, to make him "look good" in places where he might not. It was, undeniably, a thrill and an honor to add his imprimatur to the work. However, it should be understood that his motive was to give his blessing to the "complete" written record of the Temptations that his own, more conversational memoir was not. After all, could there be any more dedicated a Temptations fan than their sole surviving original member? Otis's functional role in the book was not that of an overseer or arbitrator—he did *not* have veto power over any of its content—but as a source, a provider of necessary detail, a guiding hand as the saga unfolds. But he is one of dozens who were there, either helping to create or observing the drama. It is they—*all* of them—who have created this palette and the sprawling allegory of music and cultural evolution it is intended to be.

In the end, it is a story of those five-plus-one imperfect men, who as Otis Williams says with an apt metaphor, found themselves in "Camelot" for a brief, shining moment that never seemed to

fade even as their own lights did. A yet more apt one might be that place right around the corner and just across the tracks, where you can have your fortune told and you can learn the meaning of soul. Temptations fans, of course, know this place as the “Psychedelic Shack,” but long before it acquired a name in 1970, they were headed there, getting on the hardscrabble path with the first notes they sounded. And so that is where the story begins, and the music begins playing.

1

Check Yourself

There is no uniformity to the five men who carved the Temptations into history and popular culture other than the basic, incidentally unifying thread that the lives of history's greatest African American singing group began in the bowels of the American apartheid. Beyond that, they diverged radically in path, personality, and how much of the South got into their plasma. But those common roots are eminently important and relevant to their story, due to the gospel and blues they couldn't help but ingest with each breath back where they came from.

Rock and roll, which not only includes but is rooted in soul music, is a genuinely American creature and a bastard with many fathers, almost all of them rooted in the South. It was in the pit of the Mississippi Delta that the great paradox of soul took form and flight. The pain and desperation of trying in vain to climb out of dirt-poor hopelessness created some of the most overtly joyous sounds of life. What couldn't be found in money or possessions lay in the self-sustaining pride of spirituals and gospel music that rang out from the black churches on Sunday mornings dating back to Reconstruction days. That tradition would be the root of every musical species that coalesced into rock and soul music.

Even sorrowful yearning came with a clenched fist of resolve. When the fiddles of the hillbillies cadged the tonal and lyrical elements of the colored folks' music, and redneck radio began playing it, it was a portent that Jim Crow was not going to outlast the communal directive of the blues that made your feet get to movin'. In this frame, the pluck and resolve of Robert Johnson's blues guitar would carry on far longer than the blasts of cold water from hoses trained on civil rights marchers by Birmingham police chief Bull Connor's lawmen.

By the 1930s, the field had broadened to jazz and big band jump blues and their local offshoots bordered almost by each county line on the way up the Mississippi. The edgy Delta "gut-bucket" blues gave way to the smooth, swinging Memphis blues, and then to the loud, brassy urban blues seeping into the teeming northern big-city nightclubs. Along these fault lines came a parallel universe of cultural icons whom blacks could call their own, bearing names like Sleepy John and Big Boy and Blind Lemon and Pine Top. There were no "black" radio stations; the word wasn't even yet an acceptable stand-in for "nigger." For black people in the Delta, radio was the old dinosaur Victrolas at the barber-shop, the pool hall, and the family picnics. Realizing that these enclaves could be an actual market, some white record companies like Okeh and Paramount began pressing a limited number of long-playing vinyl discs, to be hungrily snapped up not just by blacks but by the "hip" white jazz and blues collectors as well. Many began to assume that God was listening to this music, because God *had* to love Satchmo Armstrong—and maybe Satchmo *was* God.

Then there were the places where time pretty much stood still. Places like Texarkana, Texas, the classic Dust Bowl sharecropping town located, as the name would suggest, on the woebegone Texas-Arkansas border—one of *two* Texarkanas, divided by the boundary line of State Line Avenue. Among its roughly eight hundred residents back in the 1930s and '40s was a bounder and part-time country preacher named Otis Miles, whose only appreciable talents seemed to be an ability to whistle as sweetly as a bird, giving rise to his nicknames of "Sonny One" and "Bird Head," and getting his sixteen-year-old girlfriend, Hazel Louise Williams—"Haze" to her friends and family—pregnant.

When Haze gave birth to a son she informally named Otis Miles Jr. on October 30, 1941, the event seemed to make little difference to their lives. Not only did Otis and Haze not bother to marry but—much

like the incorrigible “rollin’ stone” father about whom the Temptations would sing years later, “wherever he laid his hat was his home”—Otis Miles Sr. quickly moved on to other women.

Haze, for her part, soon split town with another man, Edgar Little, swept up in the great black migration northward in pursuit of good jobs and easy money. Their journey ended in what seemed nirvana to many like them, the bustling metropolis of Detroit, to which they were attracted by the whistles of the automobile factories. She was obliged to leave little Otis behind to be passed around between his maternal and paternal grandmothers, mostly the latter, Della Gooden, a strict, God-fearing woman with little tolerance for the devil’s music.

“Grandma Della was the reason why I never heard a lick of blues or R&B music when I was a child,” Otis recalls. “I loved her dearly, and she took great care of me, but she didn’t ever let me listen to any music except at the Baptist church. Besides, we were too poor to afford a radio anyway. To us, those kind of things were luxuries, for the rich folks.”

Because it was the only music his grandmother allowed him, all those church hymns seeped into his core, though it was a purely incidental effect. The main reason Otis liked to go to church was because it was the only place he ever saw his father, a storefront preacher of sorts who sometimes acted as deacon. But Bird Head never seemed to warm to the boy, and spent little time with him before blowing town again.

“That hurt me, but I learned to live with it. It made me want to be my own man, not rely on anyone, made me want to develop my own self”—far away from the painful rejections of Bird Head and the deprivations of Texarkana.

“I mean, there was really nothin’ goin’ on in that place. All I did was go down to the train yards. They used to say there were ghosts down there, of people who’d been hit by trains while walkin’ down the tracks. One time, I thought I saw one too, a man walkin’ around without no head. At least that’s what I thought it was.”

Such macabre pastimes would periodically be broken up by more satisfying moments, such as when Haze would come in on the train for a visit. “I looked forward to that, because she would tell me all about the big city, and I began making it known to her that I wanted to live there too. Because as Otis Miles, I had no identity.”

That would soon change. First, when he learned that his parents had never been married, he sent to the state capital in Austin for his

birth certificate. "Sure enough, it said my legal name was Otis Williams, not Miles. So that was it for Otis Miles Jr. He was dead and buried."

Then, when he had turned ten and was already tall and handsome, Haze sent him a Greyhound bus ticket so he could come and live in the Motor City with her and Edgar Little, whom she had married. Excitedly throwing his tattered clothes into a suitcase, he was taken to the bus terminal by Grandmother Della. On the long trip north, he remembered a line from the church sermons of his father that now applied perfectly to his state of mind—*I shall be relieved*.

Meanwhile, 424 miles to the east, in a lowlands section of Birmingham, Alabama, called Ensley, a generational chain link was moving along quite nicely down on Ensley Avenue, a chain that had everything to do with the indigenous music of the Delta.

It began with a man named Paul Williams. Born in the nineteenth century, he arrived after the first steel mills made Ensley a sort of company town for the Ensley Works plant on 20th Street and Pleasant Hill Road. In truth, little was pleasant for the hardy, mostly black workingmen of "the Bottoms," as Ensley came to be called, situated as it was in the basin of Jones Valley, figuratively and literally beneath the affluent white suburbs on Red Mountain to the south. Most days in this part of sweet home Alabama, the skies weren't so blue but instead choked with thick, tarry soot belched from the furnaces and smokestacks of the mills.

However, the skies always seemed to clear when music was made. And Paul Williams needed no prompting, singing gospel and the blues either at the First Baptist Church or at the little barbershop his family owned. Later he taught his son Rufus all the songs he knew, story songs of slaves escaping the chains of the plantation and their descendants escaping the yoke of the South. Such a stickler was Paul that if Rufus sang one note out of tune, he might suffer the wrath of a fresh-cut switch. If you were going to sing Pappy's songs, you had better sing 'em right.

By the 1930s a "Birmingham sound" had taken root, a blending of jazz and gospel with a new wrinkle. "You will know it as a rap thing," Jimmy Carter once explained—no, not *that* Jimmy Carter but the lead singer of the Blind Boys of Alabama, an important group formed in 1939. "The only difference is, they talk their stuff and we sing ours."

Music historian Henry Willett pegged it as “a vital new sound characterized by precise, snappy timing and harmonies, a preaching style of lead singing, the trading off of voice parts and a distinctive ‘pumping’ bass,” which could be heard from units like the Famous Blue Jay Singers, the Foster Singers, and the Red Rose Quartet. When the sound became known on a broad scale, local groups like the Kings of Harmony and the Heavenly Gospel Singers were signed by major record companies in New York and Los Angeles. Meanwhile, back home in Birmingham, notes gospel maven Doug Seroff, “practically every block in the black neighborhoods from Dolomite to Leeds boasted at least one quartet.”

Ensley was so abuzz with the sound that it had become a stop on the jazz and blues “chitlin’ circuit,” most notably at the crossing of the Wylam and Pratt streetcar lines at 20th Street and Tuxedo Park. There stood a nightclub called Tuxedo Junction, to be immortalized by Ensley bandleader Erskine Hawkins’s 1939 blues song of that title, which was taken to the top of the pop chart by the Glenn Miller Orchestra in 1941. Another native bluesman of the day, Herman Poole Blount, found fame under the pseudonym Sun Ra, his shtick being that he was the Sun King and came to Ensley by way of Saturn.

Rufus Williams would find his own slice of fame. When he wasn’t working in the mill, he was the bass singer of a popular gospel-flavored trio with two of his brothers, the lead handled by James “Nar” Williams. Playing the local clubs as the Williams Brothers, later renamed the Ensley Jubilee Singers, their multipart harmony was so fetching that in 1942 they landed a regular Sunday morning show on Birmingham radio station WENN, sponsored by a furniture store. Various lineups of the group, with family and nonfamily members, would perform on the show until 1980, and recordings by the original trio would be issued on a 1984 album called *The Birmingham Boys*.

It was predestined, then, that Rufus’s sons would sing, hopefully well enough to carry them away from the steel mills. He and his wife, Sophia, would produce five, and all were drilled the way Rufus had been. Paul even decreed which one would bear his legacy directly.

“My grandfather told my dad after he’d had two sons, he said, ‘Son, if you have another boy, I’m gonna name him after me, and I’m gonna teach him how to sing his notes,’” recalls fourth son Joe, who came along eight years after the birth of Paul’s namesake.

That boy, born on July 2, 1939, was sleepy-eyed and round-faced. As he grew into a teenager, he acquired the nickname of “Smut,” because in the blistering Alabama sun his skin darkened to a rich ebony, as if the sooty air left a residue on him. He also was a quick learner of “the notes.”

“Both our father and grandfather taught him,” says Joe Williams. “We all were exposed to all that music, but Paul was the only one they really focused on. My father would take him to the radio show, sit him down, and tell him, ‘Now you watch and learn.’”

“Paul couldn’t just sing—he had to know exactly *how* to sing, know the craft of singing. They didn’t say, ‘Okay, now sing baritone.’ They’d say, ‘Sing A-flat, B-sharp.’ I never even heard the word ‘baritone’ or ‘tenor’ used about Paul until years later; even as kids we all went beyond those simple terms.

“Those notes had to sound a certain way. And if they didn’t, you might get popped upside the head. My dad, he’d say, ‘Fat boy’—he called everyone ‘fat boy’ or ‘fat girl’—‘I didn’t teach you to sing that. You sing it right.’”

Smut would soon find his own voice and his own partners. At Council Elementary School, he began performing at talent shows with a lanky, razor-thin classmate who lived ten blocks away on Ensley Avenue. This was Eddie Kendrick, the son of another of those overworked mill workers, John “Prince” Kendrick and his wife, Lee Bell, who watched over her four sons and daughter with a crawling eye. The caramel-skinned Eddie—born Edward James Kendrick in Union Springs, Alabama, before Prince and Lee moved their brood to Ensley—would be ribbed all the time by his buddies about being a mama’s boy, a notion he didn’t dispel when he’d promptly leave a ball game or other rite of childhood at the exact time he said his mother wanted him to come home.

Such obsequiousness immediately set Eddie apart from his friend Paul, who as the son of a performer was given a wider swath to cut while he learned about life. His assured, worldly ways seemed to brand him a natural-born leader.

“Oh yeah,” says Joe Williams, “they were pretty much night and day, but they were extremely close, something clicked between them on a stage when they sang together. And so our families became real

close, too. Miss Lee Bell—we called her that, just like we called his father Mr. Prince—would watch over us, too. If it was a really hot day and you'd be walking down the street, it just depended on whose house was closer for either Miss Lee Bell or my mom to run out and give you a cold glass of water.

"But Miss Lee Bell really pampered Eddie. Eddie was a skinny, shy kid. It's funny, he ate and ate and ate—he loved to eat cornbread, so much so that that was his nickname, 'Cornbread'—and Miss Lee Bell worried about him because he looked so frail. And I think maybe Eddie liked to, you know, milk that just a little bit."

Miss Lee Bell became an especially vigilant warden when Eddie came home after going to watch a school football game bleeding from a nasty gash across his stomach. While the details were never clear, he'd either uncharacteristically gotten into a fight in the stands with the wrong guy or had been in the wrong place when a melee erupted and he was accidentally stabbed. Fortunately, the wound wasn't deep enough to be serious, but Miss Lee Bell, sick with fright, rushed him to the hospital, where he was stitched up and sent home. Thereafter he was under orders to call home every hour on the hour after school to inform her where he was.

For all his milquetoast tendencies, Cornbread was a handsome, sharp, and popular kid with some admirable traits. For one, he could be forgiving to those who mocked him or worse. In fact, one of the kids who picked on him happened to be Smut Williams, who, the story goes, met Eddie for the first time when as grade schoolers they got into some sort of spat on Ensley Avenue and Paul dumped a bucket of mop water on Eddie's head, sparking a fistfight. Apparently they beat each other silly until they realized they'd be better off as friends. And they would be, for life.

The contrast between the two was especially striking in their respective vocal ranges. Paul's gruff baritone commanded the scale from the middle down, Eddie's fey tenor did the same from the middle up—and up some more when he'd slide into a falsetto that approached glass-shattering levels.

"Actually, Eddie wasn't really a falsetto. That's always been a misnomer," notes Joe Williams, who would be transfixed in his kitchen

listening to his brother and his buddy vocalize. “My dad used to get upset when he’d read about the Temptations and Eddie’s ‘falsetto.’ He’d say, ‘Man, Eddie doesn’t have a false *anything*.’ He had a *natural* tenor. In music they call it a ‘Roman tenor.’ His natural voice was the perfect middle range. Best natural tenor I ever heard.

“But he could take it up to the high range so easily, so smoothly, it was like breathing. One breath, then another in that different range. So they’d write those high parts for him, which he didn’t like that much. Eddie always said he would have liked to sing in his natural voice, because he felt he could perfect it as well as his high tenor—but, you know, all falsetto singers want to do that. Smokey Robinson, everybody. They get to feeling a little funny about the high voice. It’s like a manhood thing. They worry people will say, ‘That guy sings like a girl.’ But it was just so natural for Eddie that he never could get away from it.”

The problem for Smut and Cornbread was that they could only take their voices so far in the new mainstream R&B of the 1950s within the crucible of Birmingham’s hoary gospel sound. Paul, like Otis Williams, worked up a pretty serious hunger to move up and move out when he hit his teen years. And even though Eddie had a stronger attachment to his hometown and didn’t like to think about severing the apron strings of Miss Lee Bell, it wouldn’t be long before he could be talked into joining Smut on that midnight train to the promised land, though just where that was would not be immediately clear.

A couple of hundred miles farther south on Highway 65, a narrative much like that of Otis Williams was rolling out along the Gulf coastline. In Mobile, Alabama, a fifteen-year-old girl named Rose English became pregnant by another country preacher man. When it was time, she traveled up to a hospital in Montgomery and gave birth on October 12, 1942, to a son she named David Melvin English, having no intention of giving the boy the surname of the man who’d gotten her in a family way—a man she so detested that today, in her eighties, she recalls him only grudgingly, though she remembers all too well how she became pregnant.

“It’s been so long that I forgot the bastard’s name,” she says, angry as a hornet. “I think it was Dunbar or something. He was the pastor of

our church in Mobile. But he don't need to be talked about, because I was never married to him. I was nothin' to him."

Pause. "It was a rape, and that was it."

Like Haze Williams, Rose fell in love with a different man—Willard Franklin, whom she married. The newlyweds had no intention of sticking around the backwoods of segregated Alabama, where talk spread about the Jezebel who bore the preacher man's bastard son. A few years later, after Rose had given birth to a daughter named Beverly, the Franklins decided to take off for the automobile assembly line oasis in Detroit. Before they could leave, however, Rose's dowdy grandmother, who had raised her, stepped in.

"She thought I was too young to take care of two young kids and so when I left she did not let me bring them with me. She said she was going to raise them as her children. I didn't like it, but that's the way it had to be. I felt that by leaving and making a better life for myself, I'd be able to give my children a better life when I would take them back."

That wouldn't happen for eight years. As Willard Franklin worked long hours at the Cadillac Motors plant, David Melvin English, just like Otis Williams, knew his mother only by her fleeting visits. During one such return trip, Rose was in the audience for a kindergarten recital when five-year-old David played Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. She was stunned when her son opened his mouth to speak and out came a deep, booming sound.

"When he got finished, everybody got up and gave him a standing ovation, which I could tell he liked. I said, 'Where did my boy get that voice from?' I didn't know anybody in either family who had a voice like that. The only way to look at it is that God gave it to him."

Finally, in 1952, when he turned ten, Rose regained custody of David Melvin and Beverly. "My grandmother felt that she was too old and sick and she couldn't barely take care of them. She called me and told me, 'You can have the kids now, baby. 'Cause I can't raise 'em no more.' So she sent them to me on the train."

David Melvin arrived as a rather sheltered kid who was proud of and a bit sensitive about his precocious voice. It was obvious he was going to sing, in school and wherever else he could find an audience, all the more so because it got him out of the house and away from his stepfather. Unprepared as he was for life in the big city as he tried to

bond with a mother he barely knew, it was the man he knew not at all who proved the biggest hurdle to overcome. More and more, his sense of acceptance, his refuge, would become that ungodly voice from somewhere deep in his soul.

Detroit, like every other northern metropolis, had undergone a dramatic, seismic metamorphosis over the first half of the century, one that offered the children of the new emigrants from the South a ready-made means of self-expression and identity in the artistic evolution of the gospel and blues that had loosened racial tethers.

Today, Detroit is the blackest of American big cities, with African Americans comprising a full 80 percent of the population—almost a complete transformation from the first decade of the twentieth century when blacks were a microscopic 1.2 percent, a pittance by comparison with German and Russian immigrants who made up 15 percent. Twenty years later, it was still only 4.1 percent. By 1950, the black population had swelled to 16 percent, but in the growing downtown ghetto, the darkening acreage sent whites on their own flight to the more comfortable (read: less threatening) exurbia.

The overcrowded streets and lodgings designed to accommodate half as many people meant that something inevitably had to give—and it did, in high crime rates and regular crackdowns by white cops who neither lived in town nor cared how many heads they cracked open. Still, while the racial fuse was lit—in 1943 a race riot on Belle Isle spilled onto Woodward Avenue, with 34 people killed (25 of them black), 675 injured, and 1,893 arrested—it burned mostly quietly until the 1960s when urban rot met militant activism and set the city ablaze.

In the interim, for around three decades, the Motor City experienced its own version of the Harlem Renaissance, a major artery of a black cultural rising, pounding with the new music the Delta bluesmen brought north with them. Although Chicago had the transplanted blues titans like the “Hoochie Coochie Man” himself, Muddy Waters, and his cohorts Howlin’ Wolf and Willie Dixon, Detroit claimed its own colony of blues greats—its head pilgrim being the redoubtable John Lee Hooker, who bought his first electric guitar in a pawn shop on Hastings Avenue, surely a signal notch on the rock and roll timeline.

All along grids of crisscrossing streets bundled into neighborhoods with wistful names like Paradise Valley and perversely prideful ones like Black Bottom, blues and jazz clubs lined the wide boulevards and burned into the wee hours. On the teeming concrete swaths of Hastings, John R, Beacon, Mack, Gratiot, and a thousand other streets, there seemed to be at least one “tuxedo junction” on every block, from the auto plants to the north down to the docks of the Detroit River in the south. They passed before the eye in a kaleidoscopic flurry of hip, exotic lingo: Cafe Bohemia, the Roostertail, the Paradise Lounge, the Flame Show Bar, the Twenty Grand, Club Three Sixes, El Sino, the Band Box. There the marquees told of majesty—Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, Lester Young—or local upstarts such as T-Bone Walker, Hank Ballard, Little Willie John, and Andre Williams.

The scene was proudly, impudently decadent. Because the black *hoi polloi* was by nature restricted in its access to ownership of the businesses along these byways, including the honky-tonks, many of the black leisure class were “street capitalists”—pimps, loan sharks, bookies, and so on, all of them grouped under the designation of hustlers, almost a noble term given the respect they pulled. In fact, it was understood that hustling was merely a means of upward mobility, to an end somewhere in the music business—a dream basically shared by everyone on the street and rapped about when the dudes unwound at the congested bars inside the overheated clubs and talked big talk about their can’t-miss futures.

The 1950s brought about a change in musical tastes, and a great swell of potential talent for the hustlers to feed on. Blues and jazz had begun to recede before the hard charge of R&B-cum-rock, mainly in the group dynamic of doo-wop that became a flame to the moths of the baby boomer generation. The endless waves of teenagers embraced its repetitive moaning and shrieking about thinly disguised sexual flowering, and deflowering, as something purely proprietary.

It was a shifting ground of culture, mores, and music, all perfectly timed for someone—or groups of someones—to take the work of those bluesmen to a whole new, unfathomable level of mainstream appeal. And while no one could have known who that might be, they were on the way.

2

You've Got to Earn It

Otis Williams had none of the assimilation problems faced by David Melvin English. He arrived in Detroit with the swagger he'd dreamed of unleashing in his stifled childhood in Texarkana. Prowling the streets of the city's northwest quadrant, where Haze and Edgar Little lived in a small apartment on Clairmount Street, he immediately adapted to the teenage ethos that wound around the vital nucleus of rock and roll.

By the mid-1950s, he'd grown into quite the Romeo: tall, cocksure, flirtatious, ready with the right come-on line, his hair slicked up in a great spit-curved squiggle like the doo-woppers wore their hair. The rags of Texarkana were replaced by sharp-creased slacks, tab-collar short-sleeved shirts, and jaunty fedoras. Making up for lost time, Haze, while leading a drably spartan life herself, indulged her son's aim to be the best-looking boy in his school by spending a good portion of Edgar's Ford Motors paychecks on his teen-idol whimsies.

Neither did she fret about him staying out late on the streets. For one thing, he was a "good boy," and clearly mature for his years. For another, she assumed he was out there harmonizing on the corner

somewhere with the other Romeos, and often she could hear him doing so in the distance from her window. Then too, Haze figured that hanging with the neighborhood hotshots probably meant that the hoodlum gangs would leave him be—the presumption being that Otis wasn't himself a hood, something no one could ever really be sure of given how intimidating he looked.

Indeed, he was marked as a kid to keep a distance from, advice dispensed in particular to many a girl on Clairmount by their fathers. Not that this advice usually took hold; with his strut, smile, and familiar presence in the street-corner singing groups, as he went through the rites of passage at Northwestern High School he was preceded by gossip about his “equipment” and of all the tail he got—rumors that he today laughs were not exaggerated. Such a reputation, of course, is never a bad thing, especially at sixteen. In fact, without having accomplished anything tangible yet, Otis—if you were lucky, you got to call him “O”—was already being regarded as a born leader of men among the street-singing crowd. It was he who normally put together his groups rather than being asked to come into other groups, and he who decided who stayed and who didn't. Consequently, he amassed a wide knowledge of the talent pool in the area, his head a Rolodex of potential group members, managers, and promoters of local record hops and church talent shows.

This information was important when, late in 1957, he formed a group he named the El Domingos—for no special reason other than, he says, “it was a nice pretty-sounding name”—with running buddies Elbridge “Al” Bryant, Arthur Walton, and Donald Michelhenny. Otis was canny enough even then not to impose himself as the lead singer. Al Bryant, a tall, tightly wound kid, had better pipes and “a beautiful range,” Otis says. “He could go real high, like a girl,” a desirable commodity for doo-wop groups, as it made for a stark contrast with the ever-present bass singer. Not incidentally, either, Al was the only one of them who could get his hands on a car—his mother's—so they could be mobile. Still, no one doubted Otis's dominion.

“You just got the feeling Otis was the man,” recalls another kid doo-wop singer on the street, James Crawford, who was dubbed “Pee Wee” for his diminutive stature. “I mean, the guy looked the part. The first time I saw Otis, I was walking down the street in his neighborhood, on Seward, I think, with a friend of mine, Jesse Christenson. We were singing an old Drifters song, ‘Warm Your Heart,’ and Otis was coming

from the other direction. He had a big stick in his hand and was wearing a brown hat. Jesse and me, we didn't know what this guy had in mind, he had that look, you know, like he could've been a hoodlum, so we were a little nervous.

"But then when he heard us singing, he threw the stick down—which we were quite relieved about—and asked, 'Hey, either of you guys sing lead?' I said, 'Yeah, he does,' pointing to Jesse. Next thing you knew, he was saying that he knew some guys who needed a lead singer and he took us over to this house—I remember the address, 3006 Blaine Street. That was where Al Bryant lived. When we got there, there were like ten guys in the basement hanging out and singing in different groups. I guess all the neighborhood groups went there to congregate.

"Otis put Jesse in with the guys in his group and decided he'd be one of the El Domingos. Jesse, though, wasn't into it as seriously as those guys and a few months later he quit, and since I'd been hanging around with them and singing in Al's basement, Otis said, 'Okay, Pee Wee, you're in.'

"Let me tell you something. I never made it to the Temptations—by my own choice—although I did make it to Motown on my own. And you might say that day changed my whole life. Because Otis introduced me to everybody who was anybody, and I'm still singing professionally today because of many of those people, a lot of whom I still know. Otis and I always were big believers that everything comes about because of good timing. We've both benefited by it."

A laugh. "Course, he's benefited more than me. A *lot* more."

The only constant about the El Domingos was change—in their faces and the names of the group. Only Otis and Al would make it through all the changes en route to Motown. Soon after Pee Wee came in, Michelhenny went out, his place taken by Vernard Plain. This lineup—Al on lead, Otis and Pee Wee on tenor, Arthur Walton on bass, Plain on baritone—remained stable enough to fuse into a tight quintet and was able to secure a few pass-the-hat gigs around town early in 1958. As for the group's name, that morphed into something they believed would be more doo-wop-friendly.

"We used to like the Turbans," Crawford says of the Philadelphia quartet who scored a Top 40 pop hit in 1956 with "When You Dance,"

a seminal R&B/rock root. "They used to wear turbans on their heads, which was really cool. There was another group, too, the Nightcaps, who also wore turbans, and we wanted to do something like that."

Pondering what they believed to be Middle Eastern lands, someone suggested Siberia, which *sounded* like a place with sheikhs and sand, and so they became the Siberians. Today, Otis is sheepish about the choice, it having been brought to his attention a few times that they don't wear turbans on the frigid east coast of Russia. What's more, considering the metaphoric fodder it provided for critics, he can be believed when he says, "I just thank God it didn't stick for long."

While it did, however, the group seemed to have pulled a few real breaks. The first was when they found one of their many managers, a guy Crawford remembers only by the last name of Frakes, who had an in, or so he said, with the owners of Fortune Records, Frank and Devora Brown. "Frakes tried to get us in there. I think we may have even signed a contract. But nothing ever happened. They never called us to make a record so we were back out pounding the streets again."

That was a common letdown for the idealistic young street singers of Detroit at the time. The biggest hurdle was that while the music scene was bubbling and self-sustaining as far as most of the Paradise Valley denizens were concerned, the new nationwide rock and roll market was becoming a shared dream, and out of reach for too many in a town with no major record labels or few, if any, talent scouts interested in going there to check out the scene.

"Usually what happened," recalls Otis, "was that you'd cut a record and hope that someone would be able to sell the master to a label out of town," a common target being George Goldner's Gone and End Records in New York and the Chess brothers' eponymous label in Chicago. Indeed, the local recording "industry" was so small change that the idea of an enterprise like Motown crashing the party with the big boys would have seemed preposterous only two years before it started up—not least of all to Berry Gordy, who in that fold of time was merely one of those night-crawling street hustler/showbiz wannabes pleading for a break.

In fact, no label in the Motor City even owned its own studio space. Fortune had its acts cut records in a makeshift studio in the back of a barbershop. Another, H.O.B. Records, was so named

because it operated out of the House of Beauty women's salon. The more appointed studios, like Specialty or United Sound—where John Lee Hooker cut “Boogie Chillen” in 1948—were generally too pricy at twenty bucks an hour, which was why Hooker did most of his recording in the back of Joe Von Battle's Hastings Street record store.

Even so, such primitive conditions, says Otis, were unwittingly vital to the congealing of a communal interplay between acts, good and bad. “We were all stuck in the same boat. It was a real community feeling, like a big family, which was what Berry would draw on; it was his secret weapon, really. Because everyone wanted everyone else to succeed and we all helped each other.”

The Siberians, as it happened, crossed paths with Gordy early on, probably earlier than Otis figures, which he says was in the summer of 1960 when Gordy caught them performing at the St. Stephens Church community hall. At that time, they were no longer the Siberians and Gordy had already begun Motown. James Crawford, though, clearly remembers otherwise.

“Hell, we knew Berry *way* before Motown. We knew him when he was staying in a little apartment on Blaine and 14th Street. That would have been around fifty-eight. He was just another guy, like us, trying to scratch by, and he was just starting to get ahead, licensing records he was writing and producing to out-of-town labels. In fact, he was living with Jackie Wilson at the time. That was his big break, getting to write songs for Jackie Wilson. We'd just go up there and hang with them, talk about music and shit. We didn't think nothin' of it.”

Gordy, for his part, further confused the issue in his antiseptic 1994 autobiography *To Be Loved* by saying his first memory of them was when they were the Temptations and auditioned at Motown, which would have been in 1961. But then he remembered little of anything with clarity in that overstuffed memoir. Crawford's take seems the most logical, given the parallel history of the future Temptations and the future Boy King of American Music.

Gordy, to be sure, was in 1958 moving faster into uncharted territory than everyone else on the scene, having learned how to game the system better than most. A short, squat Detroit native, Berry Gordy Jr.—actually Berry Gordy III, as he preferred *not* to be addressed—was pushing thirty at the time, and had been around the block a few times. After a hitch in the army during the Korean War, he'd bounced around

from one aborted career to another—a middleweight prizefighter, owner of a jazz record emporium, a traveling cookware salesman, and an assembly line drudge at Lincoln-Mercury—before finding his calling mid-decade as a songwriter. Or rather, one of his callings; he also spent his time gambling, mostly in poker games at which he lost thousands of dollars, and making love to as many women as he could, never mind that he had a wife, Thelma, and two sons at home.

By 1956, Thelma had filed for divorce, charging abandonment and adultery in excess, as well as physical abuse. But they were both too broke to hire lawyers and remained technically married for years after he moved out and eventually shackled up with a talented and adorable young singer and musician named Raynoma Liles. Years later, Liles would reveal that Gordy kept a little something off his résumé from his lean days, writing in a 1990 memoir, *Berry, Me and Motown*, that he earned some of his keep in the late 1950s as a pimp.

He, then, was the solid citizen who would be regaled as one of the most successful, filthy-rich cultural icons of the century. But amoral or immoral cur and cad that he was, no one doubted that Berry Gordy could play an angle, and ride it hard. Gordy could ooze charm and bravado. He had a way about him that made him seem taller, better-looking, more talented, and smarter than what he was—a high school dropout who never would learn how to read or write with proficiency. Nor could anyone deny that he had the drive and the nerve to go along with the bullshit.

In the end, though, the most propitious thing he had was a remarkable family of savvy and wealthy people who routinely went to college, established thriving business ventures, and rubbed elbows with both the black and white upper crust in Michigan social circles. Next to them, Berry was the family black sheep, the cringeworthy Gordy. But their pity saved him; they offered him lodging when he found himself homeless or money when he was down to his last nickel.

With a stroke of perfect luck, his older sisters Gwen and Anna—two absolutely stunning, high-maintenance women—operated the photo concession at the hot-hot-hot Flame Show Bar on John R Street, making some side money by snapping pictures of the patrons for fifty cents a crack as they came through the door. Through them, in 1957 Berry met the club's owner, Al Green, a white Jewish man with his hand in many pots, one being Jackie Wilson's career after he left the Drifters to pursue

a solo calling. With no real track record as a songwriter, Gordy nonetheless talked Green into letting him submit songs for Wilson, and after a chance meeting with another struggling songwriter, Billy Davis, who wrote under the pseudonym Tyran Carlo, the pair came up with what would be five consecutive hits—"Reet Petite," "Lonely Teardrops," "That's Why I Love You So," "To Be Loved," and "I'll Be Satisfied."

The alliance came to a head when Green dropped dead in a New York hotel late in 1957 while on tour with Wilson. The new manager of the Flame Show, and Wilson, was a Detroit sharpie named Nat Tarnopol. Gordy had made very little bread on the Wilson hits, and Tarnopol extended the drought; worse, he stuck his own name and those of some of his friends on writing credits of songs they'd had no part in. Bristling, Gordy, though he had seen almost nothing by way of songwriting royalties, issued an or-else demand: his songs must be used on both sides of Wilson's new singles, to double at least theoretically future royalties. Tarnopol, in turn, gave him no more sides, period. (Tarnopol would later head the important Chicago soul label Brunswick, but in time became enmeshed defending himself in court on a slew of accusations—including allegedly trying to have a Brunswick underling whacked—before his death in 1987.)

As hard and bitter a dose of reality that the Wilson episode was, Gordy was taking keen mental notes on the then common practice of record honchos ripping off writers and performers through onerous contracts with anemic royalty percentages. Meanwhile, he would parlay the Wilson connection into leasing dozens of songs to local and out-of-town concerns. By 1958, he had erected with Raynoma a ring of collaborators into a loose entity called the Rayber Voices, hiring himself and his posse out to either write, produce, or provide backup vocals to fledgling acts around town. The phalanx included eager young singers like William "Mickey" Stevenson, brothers Brian and Eddie Holland, bass singer Robert Bateman, and the Rayber Voices' first client, a teenage girl named Louvain Demps. Also in the mix was a high school vocal group, the Matadors, led by a mellow high tenor named William Robinson, who called himself "Smokey."

Soon, Gordy would begin moving to expand his purview into a full-fledged music company, though not a soul, least of all him, could know that much of the original cast of what would emerge as Motown was already in place.

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With not the slightest notion that their locus and Gordy's would one day intersect, the Siberians moved ahead, unsteadily, on their path. Their objective in mid-1958 was to get a record cut of an original song but with a familiar feel and hook. Touching those bases, Otis Williams wrote a tune he has always recalled as "Pecos Kid," a rather obvious knockoff of the Olympics' summertime 1958 Top 10 hit "Western Movies," a novelty doo-wop fillip with sound effects of six-shooters ricocheting.

"Actually, our song was called 'Have Gun Will Travel,'" clarifies James Crawford, who unlike Otis remembers how the tune went, breaking into a crisp rendition of the chorus: "Wyatt Earp, Cheyenne, Sugarfoot. Whoa, Pecos Kid. Have gun will travel."

Cole Porter it wasn't. But the Siberians made it the centerpiece of their act, whipping up a few corny pantomimed moves that had them "drawing" and "shooting" with their index fingers. "We used to perform it at St. Stephens on Friday nights," Crawford says, "and people would come just to see us do that song."

Another break followed when word of mouth about the Siberians filtered back to the local black radio stations. Otis's knees nearly buckled when he was washing dishes at home one night and heard on the radio perched on the sink the voice of Joltin' Joe Howard, a DJ at WCHB, intoning his name.

"It was unbelievable. I'm standing there with a wet dishrag and Joltin' Joe Howard calls out, 'So if anybody knows Otis Williams of the Siberians, have him call WCHB.' I still remember the number—CR1-1440. That's how big a moment that was for me. I damn near fell through the floor."

After calling in, he was told to bring his bunch to the station, located in the Detroit suburb of Inkster. That led to a brief regular Saturday morning spot on the station, as one of several rotating groups singing live on the air. It also led to that first record, made under the auspices of WCHB, which would occasionally foot the bill to get a hot group on vinyl so it could be played on their turntables. While this was a purely innocent practice—these pressings were used in-house and not sent out to record stores to be sold—it did walk the fine line of an ethical breach. In fact, the practice would soon be terminated as a result of the late-'50s payola scandals, when the interests of radio stations and the acts whose records they played were kept separate, at least *over* the table.

The Siberians' forty-five, no copies of which are known to exist today, would be "Pecos Kid"—or, if Crawford is right, "Have Gun Will Travel," which was backed on the B-side with another Otis-penned composition, "All of My Life." The disc was cut at a ten-dollar, hour-long session in a rudimentary recording studio in the basement of a house owned by another big DJ, "Senator" Bristol Bryant, of rhythm and blues station WJLB—"in the bathroom," notes Crawford, "because the acoustics, the thick walls, and the echo were great in there." A couple of times the session was halted when someone had to use the facility.

With Otis taking the lead on both of his songs, as hired musicians on guitar, bass, and drums provided accompaniment from outside the john, the two sides were cut in a take or two on what Otis calls a "primitive two-track tape machine." Only two nights later, "Pecos/Have Gun" was being played on WCHB, and a DJ at the station, Bill Williams, was impressed enough to take a turn at managing the group. Otis was so convinced he needed to spend all his time getting and performing gigs that he barely if ever had time to attend high school. When the principal gave him an ultimatum—either get his rear end in the classroom or be tossed out of school—he told the guy, "See ya."

Once more, however, the group stayed small-time, landing no offers from a label as they floated around through most of 1959. But Otis, at least, would meet his future, albeit fleetingly, when he was solicited by another manager, a real dandy with dazzling threads and a big red Cadillac who regularly ferried in the backseat of that Caddy three equally frustrated young singers on a circuitous, so-far fruitless journey from Ensley, Alabama.

It was neither Paul Williams nor Eddie Kendrick who precipitated their fateful exodus from the Deep South, but another restless soul of the Bottoms, Kell Osborne. A year older than Smut Williams and Cornbread Kendrick, Osborne had been singing at the same Western-Olin High School talent shows, his high-pitched baritone a near copy of the smooth R&B crooner Clyde McPhatter. Forming an alliance in 1957, the teenagers made a pact to drop out, Kell from twelfth grade, Paul and Eddie from eleventh, so that they could perform as a trio in the local nightclubs, billing themselves as the Cavaliers.

On age, experience, and swagger, Kell was the Cavaliers' leader, their Otis Williams. He usually booked gigs and collected whatever small change was dropped in the hat. Kell was the idea man, the man with the plan. He usually handled the leads, though it was clear that any of them could brand a song in his own unique style. And, critically, his horizon stretched beyond the prosaic turf of Birmingham. He had relatives, he said, in Cincinnati, who could help them land some gigs there. By contrast, he told his buddies, Birmingham was a dry hole. "Just look around," he'd tell them. "Do you wanna die here?"

"Kell was really the instigator," recalls Joe Williams. "He came up with the idea of going out of town. My family and Eddie's didn't necessarily go along. My father was already out of sorts because Paul had dropped out of eleventh grade against his will. But Paul was grown up, he had it in his head to sing for a living, so Dad's attitude was like, 'Just go ahead, do whatever you're gonna do, 'cause this is your chance.' The last thing my father wanted was for his sons to have to work in the mills. In a way, I think he admired Paul for what he wanted to do."

Smut's feistiness was fueled further by the demeaning realities of Jim Crow. Even in a town where the Birmingham Boys were radio favorites, neither they nor any other black acts were first-class citizens—something the Cavaliers found out when they were booked to play the nightclubs around Birmingham.

"They had to go through the back door," says Joe Williams. "I remember coming along with them to this one club. I was just a kid, I'd never seen anyone have to do that before, and it made me angry, being shooed to the back door like that. So you can imagine how those guys felt. My brother wasn't the kind of person to put up with that shit. Sooner or later he would have popped somebody. Rather than let that happen, they just said, 'Let's get the hell out of the South.'"

None of them had much money to travel on, so they took part-time jobs, with Paul laboring in a meatpacking house. Then, in May 1958, they caught the train for the long ride to Cincinnati, where Kell had arranged through intermediaries to audition for a local label, King Records. To the Cavaliers, it seemed to be just that easy.

They had worked up a nice little act based on Paul's nimble dancing ability and his concept of "high-tone" doo-wop in the mold of the Flamingos and the Platters. Those immensely popular groups had scored monster hits by updating moldy pop evergreens such as,

respectively, "I Only Have Eyes for You" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." Paul's idea was to roll with the white-glove sensibilities of such records, which were produced in grand style in full-blown orchestral pomp, but tweak it blacker by channeling not Paul Whiteman but the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. Their crisp three-part harmony was put to work reprising current doo-wop songs, while turning classic soft-shoe paces choreographed by Paul.

They'd spent their last dimes on snug-fitting lavender suits and white buck shoes. Sometimes they'd pull on white gloves with which they'd execute nifty hand movements such as pulling their white ties tighter or clutching the lapels of their jackets as they swayed their hips and paraded with a slide step up to the edge of the stage. The moves would dovetail with the lyrics of the song, visually telling the story as they sang.

As Kell would recall of the Cincinnati sojourn, "We stayed there one night," apparently only as long as it took for King to reject them, before moving on to a more inviting town, Cleveland—where, of course, history tells us rock and roll was born when the legendary DJ Alan Freed applied that hoary blues lingo for sexual intercourse to the new strains of "race music." But here too, there were few takers, and soon they were living in nickel-a-bed flophouses while tramping up and down Euclid, Woodland, and Mayfield to joints like Gleason's, Chatterbox, the Ebony Lounge, Leo's Casino, and other "buckets of blood," as the locals liked to call them when things got so hot inside that people had to start ducking for cover from stray bullets or clenched fists.

With no cornbread, only cold hash on the table, and already homesick after just a few weeks, Eddie was ready to give it up. Running out of money and patience, he packed his bag and hopped the train back to Birmingham. Paul and Kell stuck it out, finding a new third in a singer named William Waller. Unfortunately, though, Waller's voice proved less than stirring and they soon let him go. Paul then placed a long-distance call to Ensley—but not to the Kendrick home, as he was apparently still miffed at Eddie for leaving him and Kell in the lurch.

"What happened was, they wanted my brother Erskine, who was a year older than Paul, to join them," Joe recalls. "Erskine was as good a singer as Eddie. He couldn't sing high like Eddie but he had a powerful tenor. But Erskine wouldn't leave Birmingham. He'd fallen in love with the girl who is still his wife today and he wasn't goin' nowhere without her.

"And so they asked Eddie to go back and he agreed. Eddie was caught in the middle. He wanted to sing with them but he hated having to live like a bum and being away from his family, so if they got him they knew they'd only have him for a limited time before he'd be on the train again."

Their next interlude with Cornbread seemed to ensure he wouldn't be saying bon voyage again anytime soon. Helpfully, and with great providence for a rock historian, a paper trail exists of the trio at this point in their genesis. An African American weekly, the *Cleveland Call and Post*, saw a good angle when it found them in the autumn of 1958 almost literally singing for their supper at the Majestic, a primarily black hotel on East 55th Street and Central. The Majestic was known for its jazz room, originally called the Furnace Room in the 1930s, later in the decade the Heatwave, and the Rose Room ever since, where once a week jazz and R&B acts jammed at the "Blue Monday Party," which ran from 5 P.M. all the way until 11 A.M. the next morning. Early in the 1950s, Gay Crosse's house band included John Coltrane.

For the young transplanted Alabamans, the lure of the Majestic was undeniable. After days of frequenting the lobby and the Rose Room looking to fit in with the hepcats, they were offered jobs in the kitchen of the hotel café washing dishes; the compensation was a few bucks and being allowed to perform periodically in the Rose Room. Turned on to the story by hotel workers, the September 20 edition of the *Call and Post* ran with it. "TRIO SEEKING SUCCESS, MAKES MUSIC IN KITCHEN," read the headline over a two-column-wide photo of a grinning Kendrick, Osborne, and Williams, in work shirts, sleeves rolled to the elbows.

They had by then changed their name, inscrutably, to the B'Hamalas. While the paper never explained its origin, the name seems not to have had anything to do with the Bahamas—as in, say, the Baha Men of much later "Who Let the Dogs Out?" fame. Rather, per Joe Williams and Billy Wilson, head of the Motown Alumni Association, whose knowledge of such minutiae is voracious, it was some sort of native Alabama colloquialism. "I believe it was pronounced like 'Bamalas,'" notes Wilson, "and that some folks in Alabama called themselves that." They had also, it seems, found themselves a new manager, a Mrs. Sylvia Perkins, conveniently the former manager of the hotel restaurant.

Straining to fluff a rather mundane story, reporter Art Sears Jr. wrote of the B'Hamalas "happily" washing dishes in the kitchen after

being “stranded here [in Cleveland] for seven months in their quest for fame and fortune in the fabulous world of song” and “that much-needed break—that all-important chance of a lifetime.” Kell, chosen to speak for them, declared, “We want to record,” and Sears tried to help out, insisting, as if prompted, that “in their type of singing [you] don’t need a bass. You’ll agree if you hear them.” Hotel patrons, he wrote, would become hooked hearing them singing while doing the dishes, linger outside the kitchen, and then break into wild applause.

All this puffery appears to have paid off. Only weeks later, the October 11 *Call and Post* ran a triumphant follow-up story entitled “ABANDON DISHWASHING FOR DISC-MAKING.” Taking a deep bow, Sears pronounced that as the result of the previous story, the paper’s pet group had “realized their goal!” He cited as proof their appearance on a local radio show called *Song Search*, which had led Cleveland’s Warwick Records to “sign them up.” Sears went on:

Members of the trio won’t be found busting suds in the Majestic Hotel any longer. They’re busy getting set to cut their first sides in about another week [and] have had several rehearsals with the orchestra of Ralph Wilson, who will back them. . . . [A]s this writer predicted in the first story, things look great for the three men. . . . Meanwhile, Kell Osborne, leader of the trio, said the story has already made the rounds in Alabama, where they had to send their contracts to be signed by their families.

“We said we wouldn’t go home until we have made a name for ourselves,” Osborne says with a laugh in the story. “This looks like we may have made it. At least a start,” he added. Just as happy were his two “sidemen,” Paul Williams and Eddie Kendrick.

The story told of yet another new manager, songwriter Jeanette Thomas, who crammed herself into one of two photos of the group the paper ran, around a piano with the *Song Search* host, DJ Nate Kay. The other shot had them harmonizing under a studio microphone. The article ended this way: “Success seems now just around the corner.”

No one in the B’Hamalas boomlet, however, could have known that that corner would still be two years, ninety-six miles, and several more deflations away.

Mind Over Matter

Art Sears never bothered to revisit the B'Hamalas, who as it turned out never did make that record for Warwick and by the new year of 1959 had torn up the script and were working under one written by a character who looked like he had fallen out of a bad dime-store novel.

While it's not entirely clear why the Warwick deal came a cropper—whether the label soured on them and the material they presented, or was not very interested and put them on the back burner—Billy Wilson, the poobah of the Motown Alumni Association, says it can be traced to their new string-puller, a human peacock named Milton Jenkins.

“They hitched their wagon to Milton's star,” Wilson puts it. “and everything else they were doing or were about to do was left behind.”

Milton Jenkins couldn't merely charm a snake; he could coax it out of its skin. One of those swarms of 1950s downtown street hustler/pimps, he had the goods to show how good he was at it—which was a far piece better than Berry Gordy ever was.

“Milton had a lot of bread and he'd wave it around like [it was] growing out of his hand,” Wilson says. “He bought those guys flashy clothes, got 'em girls, drove 'em around in his big red fifty-seven Cadillac convertible. Just turned their heads. They'd never seen

anyone like that before. When Milton came 'round and wanted to be their manager, whoever those other managers were, they just dumped them flat and said what a lot of his women said: 'Take us, we're yours.'"

Jenkins, himself a Birmingham native, was in his early thirties and had come to Cleveland several years before, how and why no one really knows. A historical shadow, he guarded the fine print of his life from most people. But he was no different from his many analogs on the streets. Lanky and lean as a blade, he clad himself in shimmering suits for his forays through back alleys for girls he could put to work or night-clubs for singers he could manage. But it wasn't until he came upon the B'Hamalas that he believed he'd found a meal ticket.

That fateful turn came one night in the fall of 1958 when the proto-Super Fly parked his pimpmobile in front of the Majestic Hotel and popped into the Rose Room. On the marquee, headed that night by the popular dancer/contortionist Caldonia Young, were the B'Hamalas, who may not have escaped kitchen duty and may well have earned a recurring gig at the club thanks to the publicity they garnered for it. Evidently Jenkins was quite taken with the brown-eyed, handsome young men from his hometown, with their cool suits, smooth vocals, and insouciant moves. Later he went backstage to meet them and push himself as a manager of distinction.

If the group was still connected to Sylvia Perkins or Jeanette Thomas, those two stood no chance against Super Fly. What's more, Milton, who had several other acts, sounded like he knew the business and had some ready advice for them. For one thing, he told them, their name had to go. They needed to shed the image of backwoods Alabama hicks that their act belied. Laying it on thick, he said they were going to be a prime act, a prime-time act.

"Yeah," Paul agreed, getting in the groove, "we're the Primes!"

"You damn right you are," Milton said. "That's your new name. The Primes."

At that juncture it was obvious to them all that Cleveland was not prime-time. And Milton, it seemed, was itchy to blow town anyway. It's possible the decision was made for him, that perhaps he felt the heat from the law or a husband of one of his abundant supply of female consorts. Whatever it was, Billy Wilson ventures that after a time in Cleveland, "Milton just pimped himself out. He'd gone as far as he could

there, and he wanted bigger things. Cleveland meant he was a ‘country pimp.’ He wanted to be more; he wanted to be a ‘city pimp.’”

Jenkins knew all about the R&B underbelly of Detroit and the bubbling brown sugar on the streets of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom. The Motor City was a definite upgrade. And so in early 1959 he loaded the Caddy with his sharkskin suits, his Cuban heels, and his Primes and began to motor, Detroit leaning.

One of the singing groups already in the pool into which the Primes would dive, Otis Williams and the Siberians, would have a brief but momentous brush with Milton Jenkins as well that year. It happened after the modest success of “Pecos Kid/Have Gun Will Travel” quickly receded, leaving the group once more adrift—and with another near miss to rue.

Not waiting for a manager to make something happen for them, Otis called the Detroit Federation of Musicians seeking some backup vocal work in sessions around town.

“You could do that then,” recalls fellow Siberian James Crawford. “You’d put yourself on a standby list that producers would call when they went in and made records. And someone down there heard of us because of the radio thing and sent us right downtown to the Cadillac Towers, a big office building, to a guy named Lindbergh, like the airplane pilot.

“Lindbergh was in the business somehow and he had a big office and wore big rings. The first thing he told us was, ‘We’re not poor up here.’ Maybe because we looked poor. So we auditioned for him and he liked us. He said we should ask our parents if we could travel, because Jackie Wilson was looking for a backup group and he wanted Jackie to hear us. He said, ‘Bring me a demo record of you guys singing.’

“We all thought that was awesome, man. Jackie Wilson! We knew Eddie and Brian Holland, who were then kids like us, they were both singing then, but they knew about making demos and they directed us to this guy Leroy, who could make a tape of us. But as he was rewinding the tape it came off the reel and spilled all over the floor. We put it back on and took it to Lindbergh, but he said it couldn’t be played, to go make another one, and by the time we did Jackie was on the road with another backup group. So but for that screwup with the tape, we

probably would've been out there with him, 'cause we were that good. So that was a real big disappointment."

Still, fate is a fickle animal. Not long afterward, the Siberians checked out a rehearsal space, a converted dance studio on 12th Street. When they went in, they too could behold the majesty of Milton Jenkins, who owned the place, having bought it for his stable. Of singers, that is—the Primes had been joined by a group called the Vandeleers, whom Crawford remembers as 'four guys and a girl, with a great sound,' and a quartet of teenage girls recruited as a gender-flip corollary of his top-cats and thus dubbed the Primettes.

Runyonesque character that Jenkins was, Otis was duly impressed by him, if also more than a tad flummoxed. "I didn't know what to make of Milton. He had the clothes, the jewelry, the flashy car. He was a ladies' man—he always had two or three women with him, and I mean *hot* women. We knew he had to be doing something else to be that rich, and not to sound naive, but I didn't put two and two together until later. It's not like Milton came out and said, 'Hey, I'm a pimp.' Besides, we really didn't want to know what he was doing, as long he came through for us.

"There was a lot about Milton you couldn't figure out. Like, I don't think I ever saw him without a cast on his arm, you know, in a sling. I'd ask him, 'Damn, Milton, ain't you ever comin' out of that cast?' He'd just laugh and never talk about it."

James Crawford mentions the cast too. "Oh yeah. In fact, Milton would dance with that cast on. He'd do these moves with it, raise it up and down. It was part of his personality.

"Yeah, I kinda knew he was a pimp. It was obvious. But Milton always thought of himself as a music entrepreneur. He was real proud of his acts. After we let him manage us, he'd drive us around in his Cadillac. Milton had publicity pictures taken of all the acts and when the cops would stop him for speeding or something, he wouldn't try to bribe them. He'd just go to his trunk and pull out the pictures and say, 'I manage these groups.' We were all nobodies, but Milton sounded so important that a lot of times they'd let him go."

The mystery of Milton's arm, according to Maxine Ballard, was that he had been involved in an automobile accident shortly after arriving in Detroit and, mortally fearing doctors and hospitals, after having it treated and cast he refused to return for further treatment, believing

it would heal in time—a decision that would nearly prove fatal. A more urgent matter for him was breaking out his acts. But time wasn't kind to him there either. For all his personal allure and air of self-importance, Jenkins could not buy them a break. In the case of the Primes, this was hard to figure. Sharing the rehearsal hall with the boys from Birmingham, Otis's boys often overheard them in another room, and their harmonizing was just as Art Sears had written of it.

"The Primes," Crawford still marvels, "were three of the baddest guys you ever heard. They had a sound like nobody had, one that I haven't heard to this day—the Temptations included. They were magnificent. Very classy, perfect phrasing, perfect choreography. And Paul Williams, he was the personification of cool. He could dance like a demon and never break a sweat. Eddie and Kell were cool guys too, but Paul Williams was the coolest guy *ever*."

Otis concurs. "Heavenly" is what he calls their three-part harmony. Listening to them take on, for example, "When I Fall in Love," the '50s standard covered by many, including Nat King Cole in 1956, "it would mesmerize me the way their voices meshed. Kell sang lead mostly, but Paul and Eddie took solo parts in all their songs. They all had great ears. And their moves! It was like they followed each other on instinct. Whereas we basically stood there snapping our fingers.

"We used to invite them to hang with us. I was dating this young lady, Jeanette Poole, a very pretty young lady, and she had a big living room, so a lot of us would hang out there and sing, have these 'shoot-outs,' a battle of the bands kind of thing. I thought our group could stand up to any group—until we went up against the Primes. We were like boys against men with them. They'd come in, smoking cigarettes, looking all worldly. But they were so cool, they didn't have to lord it over us. They were real friendly, earthy guys."

For a good year, the Primes were inseparable from Jenkins. When he rented a room in a hotel on John R Street across from the Flame Show Bar, they lived there with him. It was in that room, in fact, that the Supremes first sang together, though they were called not that but the Primettes. That, too, was a Milt Jenkins concoction. Cruising through the Brewster-Douglass housing projects in midsummer, the top down on his Caddy and Kell, Paul, and Eddie in the backseat, he hit on the hot, sixteen-year-old Maxine Ballard, who was sitting on a stoop outside their apartment building with her younger-by-a-year sister, Florence.

"They were all *gorgeous*," Ballard recalled many years later, adding that of the four, she became fixated on the older man at the wheel, thinking, "This is the finest black man I have ever seen."

Even in the sweltering heat, he wore a long white leather coat, and he had that mysterious cast on his arm. His "bad boy" air and big, toothy smile made her, she said, "aroused" and "fighting to reach the highest peak of orgasm." It didn't seem to matter that she was married to a man who was away in the army. She was hooked, as was he, to the point that he could barely remember why he was there—to find some girl singers. When he got around to asking Maxine if she knew of any, she told him she sure did and pointed to Florence, who would become the original Primette. Through her came a schoolmate, Mary Wilson. Paul Williams then brought in two more, his girlfriend Betty McGlown, who was a singer and dancer, and lastly another fifteen-year-old Brewster girl he'd been told could sing but whom Ballard and Wilson knew only in passing: Diane Ernestine Ross.

For Jenkins, who dazzled the girls and their parents with his flash and his vows to protect the girls' honor—toward that end the clean-cut, virtuous-seeming Primes helped convince them by vouching for him—the Primettes had definite dividends that had nothing to do with making music. Within two years, Maxine would dump her husband and marry him. Otis Williams would get some dividends too, developing an eye for Florence Ballard that would lead to a long-simmering fling that continued even after he had a wedding ring on his finger.

More immediate, and less productive, was Jenkins's work on behalf of his acts. "He really did try with us," notes Crawford. "He wanted us to be on the level of the Primes. One of the first things he did was send us to dance school. He paid this lady to teach us steps. He sent the Supremes—I mean the Primettes—too, and also the Primes even though they didn't need it. The funny thing is that at the time, *Otis* was the only one of us that couldn't dance. He had no rhythm. But he learned. He *had to*, to get where he was going."

Given equal time, Otis testifies otherwise: "Pee Wee said *what?* I don't know why he'd say such a thing. I loved to dance, in fact I was the one who did the lead steps and the rest of the guys followed. I usually had to hang back to let them catch up with me."

Dancing fools or not, nothing seemed to break for Milton's charges. Neither the Primes, the Siberians, nor the Primettes ever cut a record under his auspices, and their gigs never gravitated beyond the talent shows, sock hops, and low-billed appearances in nightclubs. And then suddenly in late 1959, not only was work scarce but Super Fly himself was nowhere to be found. Always one to keep to himself, he never said a thing before vanishing, leaving the stable to wonder as people had in Cleveland if something—or someone—had chased him out of town.

The truth was that Milt had a fool for a doctor, his self-treatment, or nontreatment, of his shattered arm having caused an infection and gangrene to set in. In intolerable pain and burning with fever, he finally stumbled into a hospital, where doctors at first believed they'd have to amputate his withered arm—if he made it to the table, since they also thought he was close to dying. Miraculously, he responded to medication and transfusions and made it through. But, knowing he'd need months of bed rest, and too proud to be seen as an invalid, he moved out of the hotel room and into a rooming house, telling no one where he was except Maxine Ballard, who helped nurse him back to health.

That, of course left the Primes without a patron and free lodging. What with their lack of any progress, Eddie again headed home to Ensley. Kell, whose idea it was to come north, had had it too, although rather than going home he hightailed it to L.A., hoping *that* was where the honey was. (He would find at least a taste, recording now obscure R&B tunes such as "Little Darling" for Cenco; "The Bells of St. Mary's" for Brunswick, produced by a fledgling Phil Spector; "Law Against a Heartbreaker" for Highland; "Small Things" for New Bag; and "Quicksand" for Titanic. As well, he has performed since the 1970s in touring facsimiles of the Drifters, Coasters, and Platters.

Alone, and now *really* stranded, Smut Williams hung around Detroit a while seeing if he could hook up with a group or make it solo. Then, dejected and busted, he also went back to Ensley, but not for long.

"Paul still had the bug," remembers Joe Williams. "When Paul came home, my parents begged him not to go again. It was like, 'You tried, now it's time to get real.' They were concerned because he looked like he hadn't had a good meal in months. My mother said, 'Child, you're so thin!' But he didn't waver. He said, 'I came home to get myself together, but I'm goin' back.'"

"He said he knew a lot of people in Detroit. One of those I can recall him mentioning was Berry Gordy. He'd met him and he'd told Paul about his plans for a record company, and Paul was gonna go back. In fact, he talked Eddie into going back too."

Getting Cornbread back on board was no small feat. As Billy Wilson recalls Eddie telling him, Miss Lee Bell was "absolutely pouring it on to keep him home, about how she couldn't bear it when he was gone. And Eddie, being a mama's boy, was always torn in half by that kind of thing. Look, I loved the guy, but Eddie was wishy-washy, it was hard for him to be decisive. But he also felt he'd be letting Paul down if he didn't give it one more shot in Detroit."

The irony was that while Paul kept the hope alive for them, it would be a random move by Eddie that actually made Smut's big talk about Berry Gordy and Motown a reality.

The Siberians weren't through either. In fact, Milton Jenkins's absence opened doors that he'd been unable to. After Jenkins was gone, WCHB DJ Larry Dixon, acting as the group's de facto manager (doing so overtly would have been a clear conflict of interest), introduced them to a prominent Detroit record honcho, Bob West, who owned the Flick and Contour labels and managed his biggest act, the Falcons.

"Bob West liked us a lot," says Crawford, "and he set us up with Chess Records. We even changed our name for a little while, to the Five Questions, to start fresh with them. But, as with King Records, nothing happened. Chess didn't do anything with us so we went back to being the Siberians."

And so it was on to the next episode, which actually moved them into new territory. As typical of the filial atmosphere of the Detroit music scene, it happened in a familiar way, one day late in 1959.

"What happened was, we were walking on Carter Street doing our harmonizing and this woman was on her porch," Crawford relates. "She heard us and called out, 'Hey, you guys have a manager?' which actually we didn't at the time, so when she said, 'Come on in,' we said why not?"

The woman on the porch was Johnnie Mae Matthews, a bold, brassy blues singer with an admirable amount of clout on the local scene she'd haunted for a decade. Now fronting her own group, which was

alternately called the Five Dapps and Johnnie Mae Matthews and the Dapps—apparently cribbing the ghetto slang for a friendly hand-slap greeting, later contemporized with the high-five and fist-bump—she'd had a popular street hit, "Do Wop a Do" on the local Brax label in 1958. That same year, she opened her own label with her husband, Northern Records, with \$85 from his autoworker paycheck. A born schmoozer, Johnnie Mae had partnership agreements with record distributors and with Bob West, cutting him in on her label's publishing rights to tap his industry expertise.

Matthews was a sort of role model for Berry Gordy, though he was loath to admit any such thing about a woman. During 1958, she had ferried him about to some of his rounds in her long, snazzy blue 1957 Buick convertible. And of course, she beat him to the punch in the entrepreneurial derby, with Gordy having waited until early 1959 to establish his label, Tamla Records (after his sister Gwen had opened *her* own label, Anna Records, named for her sister). As Otis learned, Johnnie Mae Matthews liked to move fast.

"She invited us right in and told us, 'I'm gonna cut a record on you guys.' We knew who she was—hell, Johnnie Mae was famous. Everyone loved the Dapps. So we were like putty in her hands."

Matthews extended them a contract, something the Siberians had seen plenty of, to no avail and certainly no profit. Otis, who'd learned a thing or two about the business, took the unusual step of having a lawyer check it. "Only problem was, Detroit didn't have a lot of entertainment lawyers. Detroit was blue-collar, cars, trucks, like that. We took the contracts to a regular family attorney. Little did we know how big a mistake that was."

Indeed, all that really mattered to the Siberians was that Johnnie Mae was making mountains move. "But that was a two-way street, too," Otis points out. "She realized she had something good in us and wanted to get the fire started. Johnnie Mae had other acts—Mary Wells was there, she was just a kid, and so was Popcorn Wylie and the Mohawks [both of whom would be among Gordy's earliest Motown acts]—in fact, Mary and I had a little thing going there, we'd get together behind closed doors and do the horizontal mambo. But Johnnie Mae immediately put us out front."

The hard result of that priority was getting them into a recording session. Johnnie Mae wanted that to happen as soon as possible, but

wasn't about to settle for them doing stale covers; instead she pushed them to write fresh songs. By dint of the pecking order, that meant it was up to Otis to deliver them. He began to noodle around, riffing on the Isley Brothers' 1959 hit "Shout" for a song called "Come On." Where "Shout" went, "You know you make me wanna shout," "Come On" went, "You know you make me wanna love you in the morning," or "evening," or "nighttime," with each verse. Johnnie Mae, hearing the boys sing it around a piano in her living room, said, "We're gonna cut that one."

But before arrangements could be made for a session, Otis had to do some stitching to keep the group from unraveling. Not convinced that things would turn around under Matthews, Arthur Walton and Vernard Plain quit to finish high school. This was a seemingly crippling one-two punch, since Otis would now need to find a new lead singer and bass man. Fortunately, his antennae, tuned to the comings and goings in the neighborhood, had picked up the presence of a bass man—or boy, as David Melvin English was only seventeen but a must-get nonetheless.

Once Rose Franklin's boy with the otherworldly subsonic voice had become ensconced in Detroit, he had wasted little time in using that basso profundo in earnest, though because he was so introverted it took the constant urging of another kid to make him feel comfortable performing in public. That other kid was Richard Street, with whom David Melvin would seem to be joined at the hip through their school years. So tight were they that they would tell people they were cousins, and some thought they were brothers, which was plausible since Richard at an early age moved into the Franklin home when his own family was unable to provide for him.

By high school, it was apparent the young men needed each other for mutual support. While the moon-faced, sometimes chubby David was an honor student and Eagle Scout, he held back from other kids. In fact, both he and Richard were reluctant to mix in with the crowd, and particularly with girls. As it happened, they took turns having a crush on a schoolmate at Northwest High—Diane Ross. Richard was so smitten that his knees were apt to buckle at the very sight of the skinny, knobby-kneed, but very confident and together Ross. But she never knew it because they'd stammer and damn near dribble down their chins when they tried to strike up a chat with her. Diane Ross was known as a tough cookie and a prima donna—qualities she would

soon be perfecting—and surely, or so they believed, she would eat them for breakfast.

Their self-esteem, however, would take a quantum leap on the basketball court, with both of the boys making All-City, and in the school choir and street-corner doo-wop groups. David, who was always in demand for his resonant bass tones, even reserved a separate identity for those moments of self-esteem. On a stage, he insisted on being called Melvin Franklin. Around the neighborhood, the pseudonym became familiar. Indeed, more than once he himself would be asked, “Hey, do you know who this Melvin Franklin kid is?”

It was a question Otis Williams asked, with urgency, in the early spring of 1959. Because by then, Melvin Franklin was known from a record by a group called the Voice Masters that had been released on Gwen Gordy’s Anna label and become popular on the streets, “Needed.” Its novelty was that the same song was on both sides, with a slow version on the flip called “Needed (For Lovers Only).” The song’s bass part was its distinguishing feature, and it turned out that Franklin, who wasn’t a member of the group, had been hired just to lay down the part. In retrospect, there were other curiosities about the record, mainly that while the group itself never amounted to anything, they had two tenors who would be anything but fleeting—Lamont Dozier and one David Ruffin.

But it was the bass man whom Otis was after. As he tells it, he and Melvin Franklin’s four-decade friendship began with the latter trying to avoid him.

“I just loved the way Melvin opened ‘Needed,’ with that ‘*bom-bom*’ lick he did, and it was in my head. I asked around and someone pointed him out to me on Woodrow Wilson [Street] one day. Well, he must have seen me walking faster coming toward him and, you know, I had the process, the leather jacket, the tight pants. And Melvin thought I was a gang leader, ’cause at the time there was a guy named Daboo who was wanted for killing people on Twelfth Street, which was the next block up. I kept trying to get his attention, he kept crossing the street, and I kept crossing it with him.”

When Otis finally caught up with him and explained his need for a bass singer, Melvin told him, “You’ll have to ask my momma,” whereupon Otis went to the Franklin home on Clairmount and tried to charm Rose on the front porch—while, he says, Melvin furtively hid behind a tree, watching.

“Melvin was very close with Momma Rose—that’s what we all called her. And Momma Rose was the boss. Her concern was that Melvin was in another group, I can’t remember its name. He was singing in it with Richard Street, and she didn’t want them to be apart. I said, ‘But Momma Rose, we got a contract, we got a record date.’ And she eventually came around. She said, ‘Otis, you seem like a nice boy, so I’ll let my boy sign with you. Take care of my baby, you hear?’ I said, ‘Yes, Momma Rose, I’ll take care of him like he was my brother.’ And I always did.”

Rose Franklin, who remembers all of this save for the part about her son lurking behind the tree (“That’s something Otis said. I don’t know nothin’ about that”), in effect signed on as well, as the group’s virtual den mother. And, possibly to keep her and Melvin happy, the group’s new lead singer, chosen the next day, was . . . Richard Street.

One more piece of business remained before their recording session: losing that Siberians handle in favor of something with class. The five of them knocked around some possibilities. At first it seemed a good idea to chip off Johnnie Mae’s fame by going with the Junior Dapps, before reaching for a broader range. “It was a guy named Albert Williams who came up with one we liked,” recalls Crawford. “He was a singer with Johnnie Mae and he said, ‘Why don’t you guys call yourself the Distant, so you can go places?’—or something like that.” They all liked it, though some were going to wind up in far more distant places than others.

The “**Come On**” session, in early May 1959, can today be seen as a Motown dress rehearsal. Even the venue, Specialty Studios, would soon fall into a Motown shadow, literally so. “It was downtown, right behind the office building on Woodward Avenue and the freeway, where Berry moved the Motown office [in 1967],” Otis recalls. “I used to park at Motown, look at where Specialty was, and say, ‘Damn, that’s where it all began for us.’”

In mid-1959, however, Motown was merely a concept, not an empire. The first record that Gordy produced for his new Tamla label—so named not for any obscurely exotic or ethnocentric reason but rather for the whiter-than-white theme song of the Debbie Reynolds movie *Tammy and the Bachelor*, the kind of pop gruel that conformed to Gordy’s bourgeois tastes in commercial music—didn’t happen until just that spring.

Only then, after bumming \$800 from the Gordy family investment fund, was he able to finance the production and pressing of the record, Marv Johnson's "Come to Me," which because he couldn't distribute records nationally he licensed to United Artists. While Gordy had chosen the base of operations for his grand dream—the Motown Record Corporation—by moving into the renovated two-story A-frame on West Grand Boulevard, and had begun building a studio in the basement, Motown would not exist until December 1959 when the incorporation papers were filed. Yet even for months thereafter Motown would be a ragtagglom of knickknacks and odds and ends, in danger of going under on any given day.

In that context, then, Johnnie Mae Matthews's Northern Records was hardly a step down. Indeed, the musicians she assembled in the studio for her sessions, many of them to be key parts of the yet-to-evolve Motown sound, were *her* boys, hepcats she had culled from the cream of the Paradise Valley clubs, and though Gordy and other producers had come to employ them at their own sessions, it seemed Johnnie Mae had first call.

The atmosphere at Specialty was alive, *electric*. When Otis and the boys arrived, the previous session was still in progress—the Falcons recording "You're So Fine." Otis stood wide-eyed as lead singer Joe Stubbs, brother of the Four Tops' Levi Stubbs, did his vocal (in the chorus was Bob West's nephew, future soul star Eddie Floyd, who had a hit with "Knock on Wood" in 1966). "The Falcons were big-time," Otis says. "They had their own guitar player, Lance Finney. Nobody had that. And that song blew me away. I said, 'That is gonna be one hell of a hit.'" "You're So Fine" hit No. 17 over the summer.

Johnnie Mae's fingerprints were all over "Come On." Flitting around the studio, barking orders, she gave the downbeat for a breakneck tempo that wasn't kept by a drummer but by a tambourine tapped out by a mouthy, seventeen-year-old sharpie named Norman Whitfield—whom Otis knew from the neighborhood pool hall as a chump-change hustler.

"They called Norman the 'Silver Fox' [in the pool halls], for some reason, probably 'cause he was sly as a fox. He'd talk older guys into playing him, give 'em a sob story, then he'd clean them up. Norman looked like he could take care of himself, he was born in Harlem, was a street guy, so no one tried to break his thumbs. See, it wasn't that Norman wanted to rip you off; he just needed a few bucks. Apparently he got it in his

head that he could make some money in music, because when Popcorn Wylie would be at Johnnie Mae's house rehearsing, Norman would be there with his tambourine. He was following Popcorn around."

Wylie laid down some wild piano licks on "Come On," as did Andrew "Mike" Terry on baritone sax, while Robert White played electric guitar, Hank Cosby a honking trombone, and Robert Finch the drums. But the real gem was the lush, deep bottom that emanated from the big upright bass of a revelation named James Jamerson. Only twenty-three then, the native of Charleston, South Carolina, had already made his bones in the Motor City's jazz and blues clubs, at once distinguishable for how he plucked at his strings, with only his right index finger—"The Hook"—framed by a dangling thumb on one side and a three-fingered bridge on the other bracing the strings taut, like the teeth on a comb. The resulting sound was strikingly crisp and full, and his jazz pedigree—his main job being the resident bass player of the Washboard Willie and the Supersuds of Rhythm combo at the Caribbean Lounge—instinctively juiced up prosaic, indistinct rock and roll chords, which rarely varied beyond three chords in all, with a nervous, edgy syncopation.

Jamerson normally played, in the musicians' vernacular, a "walking" bass line, providing from the deep recesses of orchestral arrangements a kinetic movement that usually only came from guitars, horns, and keyboards. In his hands, the bass became a *lead* instrument, not merely a rhythm prop. What's more, it was clear right away that he was the only human alive seemingly capable of doing it right, with perfect nuances, never overpowering the sonic field but rather soldering the deep ranges with the other sounds. And fittingly for a man with such singular and unexplainable skills, he was also thoroughly inscrutable.

"I used to see James in the street around town," Otis says. "He'd be walking around with his bass strapped across his back. It was like he'd never let it out of his sight. You'd never know if you should say something to him, because he'd have that scowl on his face, a cigarette in his mouth, a hat pulled down over his eyes. Man, they say *I* looked tough. But James was the one who'd make you want to wet your drawers. I didn't even know then he always carried a piece on him.

"He actually was a hell of a nice guy when you got to know him, but there was something off about him, something always pissed him off.

But, you know what, all that disappeared when he played that bass. He could make some of the prettiest sounds you'd ever hear. He could make that thing *sing*. Everyone would be in awe."

The truth was that Jamerson was an inordinately insecure man who as a child nearly lost his legs when they were crushed in an accident and needed to spend years in a wheelchair, leaving him with a noticeable limp. Frequently pain would flare up in his legs, and in his late teens he'd begun to numb himself with alcohol, a habit that grew more severe as he aged. He distrusted most people except for his wife and son, and seemed to direct all his positive energies into the strings of his bass.

"Come On" was far from a classic example of Jamerson's work—or of anybody's—as it was little more than derivative doo-wop. Yet it was a Motown preamble in many respects, mainly in its high voltage. Matthews, wanting a live wire of a song that could be re-created live in clubs, turned loose the Distant in a tribal cascade of "oohs," "aahs," "bom-boms," and other joyful noises, which were echoed and prettied up by a trio of female singers called the Andantes—Marlene Barrow, Jackie Hicks, and Berry Gordy's former client Louvain Demps. All the vocals were rawly, unapologetically sexual. "I wanna make love to you," the lyric repeated, closing with Street's plaint, "I get tired, I get tired, I get . . ." It was followed by the chorus chanting a doglike panting of "*aaah aaah*" in an ejaculatory fervor.

"That was Johnnie Mae's idea," says Otis, "and it became our show-stopper when we'd do it live. The women got it, and they'd just go crazy. And we found out it was what piqued Berry Gordy's interest in us, when he heard the song."

More than a few ears heard "Come On" over the next few weeks. Johnnie Mae, pulling rank, released it listing not only Otis but herself and one James Bennett as the writers. "She was taking care of number one," Otis says with a grin. "She did a lot for the song but James didn't. He was her bass singer in the Dapps and he and Johnnie Mae were having a romantic thing going on," one that led to a writing credit as a favor. Matthews then worked through local producer (and future Motown executive) Harry Balk, who had connections in the big towns, to lease the master tape to the New York R&B label Warwick Records.

The forty-five, with an old Vernard Plain-penned ballad, "Always," on the B-side, made a bit of noise on the Detroit radio stations. In the

Detroit News's weekly "Detroit's Top Ten" listing, compiled by WCHB's Frantic Ernie Durham, "Come On" was placed as the second of four songs under the heading "Ernie Durham's Picks to be Clicks," just behind a Della Reese song and ahead of a song by a future Motown producer named Clarence Paul. Overall, the disc didn't do much—except perhaps for Johnnie Mae, who suddenly started running around with a wad of big bills. Apparently, whatever royalties accrued from "Come On" went right into her pocketbook.

As the Distant's waited for her to get around to giving them their dibs, they became her showpiece. She had "Otis Williams and the Distant's" spray-painted on either side of her Buick, and enjoyed parading them, as had Milton Jenkins with the Primes, through the streets with the top down, en route to gigs around town—from which they also received nothing from Johnnie Mae, who was directly paid by the clubs for the appearances. As Crawford puts it, "We were basically Johnnie Mae's pets. She expected us to be on call, like servants. If she had to go to the store, she'd send us or take us with her to carry her packages."

Matthews set up a second recording session early in 1960. Again, Otis had to scramble when Pee Wee, tired of waiting for even a piece of gold, split. "I'd gotten married, I had a lot of responsibilities," he says. "Otis understood, and I knew he'd get somebody else. Otis always had somebody in reserve." This time, it was a powerful tenor, "Mooch" Harrell, whom he lured from a group called the Ricardos. Harrell, who didn't sing as much as bellow, fit right into the Distant's scare-your-pants-off vocal style, which marked their next single, "Alright." Released in the spring, backed with a ballad fronted by Otis called "Open Your Heart," the record again received squalls of airplay in Detroit and reports of sporadic play elsewhere. Yet it seemed interest in them had only dwindled, something that could be gleaned from their bookings.

"Johnnie Mae would send us anywhere we—or she—could make a dime from it," says Otis. "Fights, shootings, stabbings, you name it, we saw it."

Accompanying them, and sometimes performing on the same bill, Johnnie Mae didn't seem to mind the degradation, which she was evidently quite accustomed to. With a shudder, Otis tells of the time she couldn't wait in line to use the ladies' room at one such blood bucket in Mount Clemens, Michigan. She grabbed an empty can from a kitchen shelf, went backstage, and relieved herself in the can, then

simply put it back on the shelf. From the stage a little later, he saw the cook, thinking it was a can of cooking oil, take it and pour what was in it into a skillet of frying chicken. "We were paid with a free meal that night," he recalls, "but for some reason we weren't hungry."

Finally the situation with Matthews came to a head. True, she'd paid for the group's sessions, their suits, their meals. Contractually, she could deduct whatever expenses she wanted from their royalty share. Still, Otis maintains, "It had been a long time and we'd gotten nothing. As the group leader, it was up to me to, you know, *inquire*. Johnnie Mae was intimidating so I was a little scared of her. But I also was the writer of these songs, and she was selling the masters all over, the record was selling. I didn't get nasty, I just asked, 'Johnnie Mae, do we got any royalties comin'?'"

"And with that, she just tripped out. She got real ticked off and said in a very . . . not in a nice way, 'Royalties?! Don't be asking for no royalties, it's my money! I own the [Distant] name, I don't need you guys, I'll get five new guys.' And I got all pissed off and told her, 'Fuck, go ahead, keep the name. We're young, we'll go somewhere else.' And that was it. We basically fired each other."

It may have seemed the righteous thing to do, but when the smoke cleared the plain truth was that they were a group now without a name, contract, or prospects. Otis went back to the grindstone, looking for a new guardian angel, somehow trying to keep them together and well practiced. But that seemed nigh impossible when, first, Mooch Harrell became a major pain in the ass. "He was a sweet guy, but when he'd drink he'd become hostile and mean. I mean, we all drank, but most of us did those cheap wine and beer shots. But Mooch, he'd go right for the hard stuff, the corn liquor, and he couldn't stand up."

Worse, Mooch was influencing Al Bryant, who also began to drink too much and alter *his* personality. When Otis fired Mooch, he hoped it would scare Al straight. Looking back, though, James Crawford giggles at the notion of Otis dropping the hammer on someone else for the offense of boozing. "If truth be told, everybody drank a lot. Otis was right there in that respect. But some of us held it better than Mooch and Al, and those are the ones who can today act like saints, which none of us were, believe me."

Other fissures developed as well. Melvin, for example, would straggle into rehearsals out of sorts, "pissed off about this or that,"

says Otis, who thought he got to the root of the problem when he noticed bruises on Melvin's face and arms and asked what happened. "Melvin said his stepfather was beating him up at home. In fact, he and Richard said they wanted to fight the guy.

"I couldn't relate to shit like that. My stepfather would never have done that to me, he was a wonderful man. And from what I saw of him, Melvin's stepfather seemed like a regular guy. But apparently there was something inside him that made him abusive to Melvin. We were like a family in our group, and Melvin felt more at home with us. And we felt for him. For a while, we plotted on how to jump his stepfather and get revenge, but we let it slide."

Understandably, the matter is a sensitive one for Momma Rose, who is forced to walk a fine line between her son and the man she loved and still defends. "I'm not telling you anything like that," she says of Otis's contentions, "because I don't know of any problems [Melvin had] with his father. I'm not gonna say anything bad about my husband. All I can say is, don't try putting nothing bad down about my husband, 'cause Mr. Franklin raised Melvin, took care of him till he was grown. We were married for twenty-seven years until he died in 1975." A pause, then, "And he never hit Melvin."

Richard had his own personal travails, of the amorous kind. "He just stopped showing up, so it became just me, Melvin, and Al," Otis says. "We knew it had something to do with a girl, but it wasn't until years later that Richard told me this chick he'd been seeing, Shirley or something [James Crawford says she was Norma Peach, who was in the group that Franklin had ditched to join the Distant], told him she was pregnant. He said, 'Otis, the bitch lied. She wasn't pregnant, she just wanted to trap me.' But he found out too late, 'cause by then we'd moved on as a group, with a new cast."

It was a cast now historically profound, but in late 1960 they had not the slightest inkling whether they'd be together for one day beyond the latest audition Otis had scared up. That one was for just about the last music meister left in Detroit, Berry Gordy.

4

Get Ready

Although Gordy was an obvious target of opportunity for Otis, the business of securing an audition at the fledgling Motown was neither overly pressing nor remotely equitable with finding instant success. Thus the squeals of giddy glee in the 1998 *Temptations* TV miniseries when Gordy proffers an invitation after seeing the group perform during the summer of 1960 are one of many examples of what Otis uneasily calls “dramatic license”—in other words, pure fiction. (Another, from the same scene, was that the Primes and the Primettes—both of whom were by then long defunct—were on the same show, with the girls singing backup for the boys, something that never happened.)

But then Otis too has apparently given added depth to that event as well, noting it officially as the moment he met Berry Gordy. As he tells it, the Distant, nearing the end of the line with Johnnie Mae Matthews, were onstage at the St. Stephens Church community center when Gordy rolled in with his protégé and adjutant Smokey Robinson and the latter’s group, recently renamed the Miracles, Gordy’s first signature Motown act.

“They were hot at the time, they had ‘Got a Job,’ which was a big local hit,” Otis says. “And Berry used to go to the record hops with them. So it was really fate at work that he came in that night. That’s why, when I look back, it was like it was meant to be for us.

"What happened was, when we came off the stage, the crowd wouldn't let us go. We had to go back out there two or three times for encores. And seeing the Miracles there, and knowing they'd be going on as the main act, we just couldn't let the guys eclipse us, so we turned it up. When we finally came off, Mr. Gordy and I were standing side by side watching the Miracles, and he said, 'I'm interested in you guys,' and handed me his card with 'Tamla' on it and said, 'If you should leave where you are now, come see me.'"

In another of Otis's renderings, that meeting came when both men were side by side at urinals in the men's room. But even if some details are fuzzy, and whether or not Otis actually knew Gordy well before then, as James Crawford insists, it surely was providential that Gordy found his way to St. Stephens that night, as his invitation became a fresh opening for the group once they were rid of Matthews. Otis would call in the chit, but it would take a while, since—as always, it seemed, when big doings were pending—he had to fill more holes, the ones left by Richard and Mooch.

This time, though, even before he could put his ear to the ground in the neighborhood, his job would be done for him, merely by putting his ear to the phone. "Again, fate. I picked it up one day, and out of the blue, it was Eddie. He said, 'Hey, brother, what's new?' I couldn't believe it. I said, 'Cornbread, you are right on time. I need a tenor, and right now.'"

Kendrick, who'd just made it back to Detroit with Smut Williams, was at least figuratively a new man. Hoping to change his luck this time around, he was calling himself Kendricks, with an "s" at the end. He could have had no idea it would pay off so fast, for him and Paul. The latter, in fact, may have himself had in mind calling on Berry Gordy, as he'd implied to his family when he went back to Ensley. As it happened, that ticket had already been punched, by Otis.

"I told Eddie about the Motown audition and he said, 'Can Paul come along? Can he join the group too?' I hadn't even thought about that, but it was a no-brainer. I said, 'Man, as good as Paul is, get him right over here.'"

Within hours, Eddie and Paul were at Otis's house, as were Melvin and Al, meshing harmonies on the Distant's repertoire of songs, as well as others bandied around. Paul was given the lead on most of them, improving on Richard Street's straightforward high tenor with a scratchy current of soulful emotion, which on a song like the Gene McDaniels

hit “A Hundred Pounds of Clay” transformed the doo-wop form into a yearning, torchy kind of blues. They also began working on moves from the old Primes catalog.

“Right away, Eddie and Paul made us better,” Otis admits. “We were a *complete* group now. Mainly what they did was, they brought us a gospel flavor. We could even make ‘Come On’ sound churchy. We even put the Lord’s Prayer into our act, and it worked because it moved people, and moved us. So we could bounce back and forth between that and the raw, sexy stuff.

“The whole thing was put together by Paul. The cat was brilliant. He had it all worked out in his head. He told us, ‘We’re not gonna stand and sing—we’re gonna dance, flash, sell sex, get spiritual, and do it all with class.’ Hey, the brother knew what he was talking about. He could see into the future.”

Otis finally made the call to Motown in early March 1961, whereupon an audition was arranged at 2648 West Grand Boulevard. When they went, they agreed to go in with several songs but that the big gun would be one called “Oh, Mother of Mine,” a reworked, retitled version of a tune Otis had written with Johnnie Mae Matthews, “This Heart of Mine,” which they weren’t free to do because she owned it. The group, too, was reworked and renamed—twice, the first time as the Elegants, until they were reminded that the name was taken by the New York quintet that had had a No. 1 hit with “Little Star” in 1958. They then settled on the Elgins, which was phonetically similar.

Actually, that name was taken as well, and not just by the watch company, which might conceivably sue (a misplaced fear, as it happened: a few years later, Motown would sign another group with that name). And so there would need to be a *third* rechristening. “The whole thing with the names was crazy,” Otis says. “Like, when we’d started calling ourselves ‘Otis Williams and the Distant’—which was Johnnie Mae’s idea—we had to drop my name because there was another guy who had a group called Otis Williams and the Charms, and he said we were stealing his name! With the Elgins, we just said, ‘Hey, let’s do this audition and deal with it later.’”

In his parallel universe, Berry Gordy was undergoing some identity confusion as well. In fact, Motown was not the common brand for his

operation. Instead, by his own choice, the trademark was "Hitsville U.S.A.," which was spelled out in big blue wood planks attached above the bay-windowed entrance of the West Grand Boulevard house that served as Gordy's offices, studio, and residence.

This colophon was an accurate gauge of Gordy's intention for his new kingdom. By the nature of the Motor City's racial topography, his *métier* was rhythm and blues, of which his acts were avatars. But Gordy saw the general landscape of popular music as if through a periscope, high above the immediate musical foreground, in the ether where ethnic music—even the best R&B—fell into a niche somewhere miles below. By staking his claim to an all-inclusive "hitsville" that had never existed before for "race music," he acknowledged that black wasn't just black; that black could be white, too, if black idioms could be assimilated into white ones.

Gordy of course wanted money, lots of money, but he believed it would be a reward for bringing pop music full circle. It had been white music people, after all, who had stripped black music of its essential constituents—gospel, blues, jazz—to turn it into the fruit of white pop. Now it would be a black executive who would take from white pop the meters and measures to unearth a new idiom—black pop. In so doing, Gordy began to worship at the altar of the crossover, that long-sought, rarely achieved overlap in which black records appealed enough to the mainstream music market to make it onto the weekly *Billboard* and *Cashbox* pop charts. He didn't want an occasional hit; he wanted to own those damn charts.

The problem in the beginning was that autonomy and genius were no match for poverty. Gordy's personal creed was codified for eternity in one of the first songs to come spinning out of Hitsville, which he cowrote with a young female songwriter he'd put to work as his receptionist, Janie Bradford—"Money (That's What I Want)," sung by skinny nineteen-year-old itinerant Mississippi expatriate Barrett Strong. Gordy ingeniously produced it, turning an old Drifters chestnut, "Money Honey," into a chugging anthem of avarice, but, unable to distribute it nationally, he had to lease it out to Chess Records, whereupon it rose to a modest No. 23 on the pop chart in early 1960. Not until Smokey and the Miracles' "Shop Around" late that year did he have any kind of mechanism in place to release a record nationally on the Tamla label, and he hit the jackpot when "Shop Around" soared to No. 1 R&B and, more importantly, No. 2 pop.

Still, it would take a while longer for the formula to become embedded—the Miracles, for example, wouldn't have another Top 10 hit until 1963 with "You've Really Got a Hold on Me"—and the interim provided an entree for many acts Gordy might be able to mold into his vision. Some of the early arrivals came through the Gordy family pipeline. After Anna Records folded in mid-1960, Gordy took in Gwen's stable, including Junior Walker, as well as the Voice Masters' duo of Lamont Dozier and David Ruffin. Soon after, when Gwen and her new husband, Harvey Fuqua, former lead singer of the Moonglows, opened and folded yet another label, Tri-Phi, Berry added Fuqua and his young protégé, who was courting Anna Gordy, a singer-drummer named Marvin Pentz Gay Jr. who went by the name of Marvin Gaye. All these were moves that could make Motown seem to be a Gordy family picnic.

Then, in a signal move, though no one knew it at the time, in January 1961 Gordy signed the obscure girl group the Primettes. While Diane Ross, Mary Wilson, Flo Ballard, and Betty McGlown had only inched forward since Milton Jenkins dimmed out, they did cut several unnoticed singles for Bob West's LuPine label, which like the Distant's work for Johnnie Mae Matthews kept them in the melting pot of Detroit acts. Now, with consummate irony, the teenage girl group added as an afterthought by Jenkins—with Betty McGlown replaced by Barbara Martin, who'd sung with her brother Theodore in Melvin Franklin's and Richard Street's pre-Distant's group—managed to get signed to Motown before any of Milton's boys. By the time they'd record there, they'd have a new name: the Supremes.

In this hit-and-mostly-miss environment, it could not have mattered less around Hitsville whether or not the Distant's would make the grade when they came in for their audition on March 10, 1961. The job of hearing them fell to Mickey Stevenson, Gordy's sometime writing collaborator. Gordy had once auditioned Stevenson as a singer but was relieved when he turned out to be tone-deaf; he had other plans for him. The son of blues singer Kitty Stevenson, the young man had many connections in the industry, leading Gordy to appoint him A&R chief. The term, meaning "artists and repertoire," normally described music men with keen ears who could perceive a marketable act when they heard them.

For Gordy, Stevenson did that and much more, running the mundane operations of the shop such as hiring musicians, scheduling sessions, and choosing records for possible release. If records wouldn't be completed on time, he would override writers and producers and finish the task himself, disregarding whose ego was bruised. That rule, of course, was bent for Gordy, who could pull rank at any time and release whatever he wanted. Generally Stevenson and various other of Gordy's bobos met on Friday morning to vote on what singles to put out. When that didn't happen, Gordy would have to justify it to an adamant Stevenson, who never relented without a fight. Stevenson, a jovial, garrulous man who often clashed with Gordy, today beams in the glow of his Motown days, eagerly pointing out that because he ran Motown the way Mussolini made the trains run—on time—"they used to call me 'Il Duce.'"

Asked about the audition of what would become the most profound American singing group in creation, he laughs gustily. "You know what? It's been a *long* time. The first time they came in? Okay, let's see . . ." Refreshed with a hint—"Oh, Mother of Mine"—his memory kicks in. "Oh, that's it! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, wow. We went down to the studio and worked it out.

"I remember sitting at the piano and having 'em go through that one and a few other songs and I tried to improvise the melodies. And I can tell you this: I fell in love with those guys. They all could sing, which was very unusual for a group. But the two brothers [Paul and Eddie] got me first. Paul had that whiskey gospel sound, I call it, that growl and grit. He was like a preacher. A lot of time when guys sing like that they get out of control, lose the rhythm. But this brother stayed in the pocket. He could take it anywhere he wanted to go, up, down, around.

"And they had that polished harmony behind him. Otis, he was like an anchor, he made the others sound better by keeping everybody tight. Each of them had a spot, and they didn't try to overstep, nobody tried to overshadow anyone else. They had the three things I liked: a sound, charisma, and the gift of great individual voices. And they had something else—they were *hungry*. I've never seen a hungrier bunch of brothers. You could tell they wanted it all, and were willing to do what it took to get it.

"Listen, I knew I had to lock them in. I didn't want them getting away from us. I put a lot of stock in them, personally. Berry never heard

them sing that day, but I didn't have to recommend signing them. If I made the decision, bang, they were signed. Sometimes you could see way down the road with a group if the sound was there. You just had to find the pieces and put them together. But that was our job at Motown, not the acts. They just had to keep to the plan, keep on singing and waiting it out, not get discouraged. With groups like the Temptations and the Supremes, we were prepared to wait. And the funny thing is, it took those two groups—the two biggest acts we would ever have—longer than *anyone else*! Go figure that!”

If Gordy—whom Otis seems to recall at least flitting in and out as the group auditioned—wasn't inclined to fuss over them, neither did they walk out of the studio on air, knowing they'd impressed Stevenson. First of all, Mickey was cool about it. “You had to be,” he says. “You didn't want 'em to think they were *that* good. You wanted to keep 'em hungry and singing for their lives. But it was tough with them. They *were* that good.”

Stevenson also had a directive, one they were quite used to, and were going to do anyway—change their name again. “Elgins, that didn't work for me at all,” he says. “It wasn't exciting. Those guys needed something, well, you might say tempting.” Needing to enter a group name on the contracts, the no-longer Elgins went outside on the Hitsville porch.

“I remember it was a beautiful day,” Otis says, “and we sat there kicking around names, I don't even know what they were. And then a guy named Bill Mitchell, who worked in the office there, came out for a smoke or something and saw what we were doing. He said, ‘Hey, what about Temptations?’ Just like that. And I loved it, I wanted that one. I asked the guys and they liked it, too. Paul was more neutral. He said, ‘Otis, a name is what we make it,’ which was Paul in a nutshell. He always kept our heads straight, pounding it into us that nothing would matter but the work we put in.”

For all his emphasis on a clean and proper image for his performers, at least on the surface, Gordy was a compulsive and reckless gambler who frequently holed up in his office playing poker with his cronies,

sometimes dropping thousands on a single hand. Even so, he wasn't anywhere near ready to wager that the Temptations would take off quickly, or that they belonged on the Tamla label. That was his baby, the province of the Miracles, Barrett Strong, and favored acts like Singing Sammy Ward, an early Gordy favorite who never went anywhere. Gordy, impressed with the Supremes' upside—and particularly with Diane Ross's backside—had put out their first two singles on Tamla, "I Want a Guy" and "Buttered Popcorn," but when neither made a ripple he relegated them to his then sublabel, Motown, on which he'd put the recently signed Mary Wells, who had her first hit in early 1961, "Bye Bye Baby."

For Gordy, label diversification was a benefit, and a necessity. Even with his heavily cultivated favorite-son status at the Detroit radio stations, some program directors placed strict limits on plays from any given label, a result of the 1950s payola scandals. It was easy to circumvent this injunction by splitting releases among different sub-labels. It may have seemed presumptuous for an emerging company like Motown to diversify, but for Gordy it was a boon. He could even cut separate distribution deals for each label, boosting overall circulation of records. As an incidental perk, he could also set up an intrashop competition, something he loved to do, with acts from each label vying against other like teams in a softball league.

Still, Tamla was the flagship, its acts given the most resources and attention—helping to push onto and up the pop chart the company's first No. 1 record, "Please Mr. Postman," the debut song of the Marvelettes, a girl group from Inkster, Michigan, in August 1961. For the Temptations, there was a third option, a shaky one at that—Miracle Records, conceived at least in name only as a tribute to Gordy's big group but with the idea of being a harder R&B outlet. When the Temptations were signed, there had been exactly one release on Miracle, "Don't Feel Sorry for Me," a January 1961 single by Jimmy Ruffin, the older brother of David Ruffin. Two other R&B singers, Andre Williams and Gino Parks, each cut a record for Miracle, but they were shelved. At Motown, people jokingly coined an imaginary slogan for the label: "If it's a hit, it's a Miracle."

It's debatable, in fact, whether the Temptations had taken a step up or *down* from Johnnie Mae Matthews. The Motown contract, to run seven years, was indistinguishable from hers, with the group entitled

to split precisely one cent for every record sold; it just *seemed* more elaborate and highfalutin. For now, they would be compensated, if that's the word, at \$6.25 per session each. They were required to buy their own stage outfits. According to Motown canons, there could be no outside manager or agent. Those roles, as with all others, fell under the aegis of the in-house agency, the grandiosely named International Talent Management Inc. (ITMI), headed by Gordy's socialite bumblebee sister Esther Edwards, who was married to a Michigan state legislator.

ITMI was something of a Gordy gestapo, at least in its all-controlling reach over people's lives. It was every Motown artist's booker, accountant, banker, financial planner, and lawyer—with all of its services nonnegotiable and subject to a 10 percent commission on royalties and box-office proceeds. If that cut sounds reasonable, it wasn't until the *real* bite was factored in—the deduction of expenses—that the breadth of the ITMI shadow became clear. Those expenses, which were never itemized on paper, could wipe out even royalties on a No. 1 hit, including as they did the cost of studio time, the manufacturing of records, the storage of the master tapes (even ones that were never released as singles or album filler), and musicians' pay, which technically was supposed to be on a scale set by the musicians' union but was usually laid out by Gordy from his own pocket, at times at far higher rates. If the musicians thought he was being generous to them, what they likely didn't know was that it was just as likely the artists who unwittingly were footing the bills.

Not that much of this chicanery was well known. Transparency was *not* Gordy's way of doing business. For example, all the way up to 1977 he steadfastly refused to allow the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) access to audit his books. For Gordy, such rights were only given, with the prerequisite of sworn secrecy, to his top accountants, immediately cutting out RIAA, which used such audits in its process of certifying which single records and albums sold enough units—500,000—to earn a gold record. (Platinum records were first awarded in 1976 for a million units sold, with multiplatinum and diamond—for ten million units sold—to follow in 1984 and 1999, respectively.) Not only did Gordy think the financial accounts of his privately owned corporation were nobody's business, but he was affronted by RIAA's charging record companies per each artist audit. Thus while many Motown artists obviously would have qualified for

a swarm of gold records and, later, platinum ones, not one ever did in real time save for post-1977 works. Incredibly, “My Girl” wasn’t certified gold and platinum until 1997—and that was the *earliest* date that *any* of the group’s twenty-three classic singles and twenty-six of its albums were retroactively certified (in addition to two platinum video DVDs).

It never worried Gordy, who with a sniff handed out his own ersatz gold records, a game that let him insist to the media that he was putting out million-sellers left and right (which he may well have been), with no risk of being refuted. The ruse worked well for Gordy; for the artists, though, it meant, sadly, that no one would ever know how many records they sold throughout all the 1960s and most of the 1970s, and in toto to this day. Indeed, the RIAA list of the top-selling artists of all time includes the likes of 50 Cent, Loverboy, and Nine Inch Nails—but *not* the Supremes, Diane Ross, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, or the Temptations. Worse, none of the legendary Motown artists ever knew how much money they made—or *should* have. They had no right to view their accounts or even to see the tax forms submitted in their names. They merely signed the blanks, which would be filled in later. They were given no bankbook and no authority to withdraw money. Whatever they saw by way of remuneration was more or less a handout by Gordy.

“All I know,” says Otis, “is that for years my money and the group’s was being held in escrow. Whatever that meant. It was a different thing then, the record business. Everybody at that time got the same kind of deal, it was take it or leave it, because no one was in the position to say, ‘Hey, wait a minute.’”

As Motown’s self-appointed agent for its own employees, ITMI was an enormous conflict of interest, and an antitrust nightmare, its practices the very definition of “restraint of trade.” To the citizenry of Motown, they were all part of a “family,” one to which they would still feel emotionally soldered more than four decades later. *That* was Gordy’s biggest victory, which kept fanning out to remarkable lengths by the year, until Gordy himself got so fat and distracted by his megalomania that he became too big for Detroit and for the music.

But all that was years away when the Temptations signed their contracts and prepared to make their first recordings as one of the family, with not a clue how long or short their future would be.

• • •

Mickey Stevenson takes no bows for being the first producer to get the Temptations inside Studio A, as he did on May 3, 1961. The big hope for any act was that Gordy would take a strong interest in them and either write them a good song or give them the vocal for one already made. Things were still loose enough that if an act had an original song, Gordy might want to get it on a record, as he did with Mary Wells's "Bye Bye Baby," with handsome results. The Temptations, too, had original stuff, headed up by "Oh, Mother of Mine," which Stevenson had liked so much at their audition. And when Gordy showed no great ardor for the Temptations at the start, Stevenson nominated himself to take them into the studio to get it on vinyl.

"In a sense, it was like making a demo record, not to make a hit," he recalls. "All I wanted to do was to get 'em to where people could hear them—really, other people at Motown as much as the public. I did not, in all honesty, have the key to making them successful. But I knew someone would, if they could hear 'em."

The problem with getting the Temptations on a record was that "Oh, Mother of Mine," as the group had conceived it, was fairly standard doo-wop R&B—exactly what Mickey *wasn't* looking to replicate. "It wasn't just that doo-wop was on the way out. I wanted to cross, big-time. I didn't want to be locked in. We wanted to really open up the boundaries. . . . I wanted to get that young white audience. Didn't make no difference to me that we were a 'black' company; there were a lot of black labels—and none of 'em could sell any records!"

Reconstructing "Oh, Mother of Mine," Mickey leaned on Andre Williams, not because of his background as frontman of such guttural soul songs as "Bacon Fat" and "Jail Bait" before being signed to Motown, but because, he says, "Andre had a great ear. He knew where to put emphasis on words, make it *move*. So I sent him in with the Temptations and he just had a ball with 'em. And that's the feel we came out with in those early recordings."

The raw, prickly vibe of the nascent Temptations songs (most of which can be heard on the 1994 *Emperors of Soul* box set) was a by-product of a Neolithic era when most records were commonly recorded in the "snake pit"—the nickname for Studio A among those who worked

there—on two-track recorders, one track for vocals, the other for all the instruments, all performed live, singers and the band at once. That made for some wild, crackling records but technically it was a mess, with porous leakage from one microphone to the next and a jumble of unfocused noise. If there was a certain charm to it, there was also a shared urgency to find better ways.

Gordy, in fact, had already resolved to upgrade his studio and install cutting-edge equipment, though the trick would be to retain the throbbing emotion and passion in the records' grooves, which was critical to the emerging Motown sound. For now, he still welcomed the spontaneity and gush of black men and women riding the sonic waves of the Motown musicians.

Indeed, more than anyone else, and any technology, it was the mighty core of what would one day be called the Funk Brothers that was most responsible for keeping the soul in Motown's brick and mortar, technology or not. According to Stevenson, they were also his purview. "All those guys, I brought 'em all in," he boasts, with reason. Although many of them were regulars at Johnnie Mae Matthews's sessions, he insists he was their real pipeline.

"I owned all the best musicians in the city. All the hot, funky guys. They were mine because I got 'em jobs in the clubs. I told 'em, 'I'll get you gigs, you give me 15 percent.' And they were so good, the clubs paid me for making sure they'd be there on time. I was, shall we say, an independent contractor. When Berry found out I controlled the best guys in town, he said, 'Make sure they keep comin' back here.' And they did. They *had* to keep coming in. I was paying them by the song."

By the time of the Temptations' initial sessions, the musicians were already a tightly knit coterie who would remain mostly intact for the next decade, the only real changes being which of two men occupied the piano bench. The first, Ivy Jo Hunter (not the better-known R&B pianist Ivory Joe Hunter), Stevenson's first hire as the original band director, would hash out the general feel of the tune, but the center of gravity from the get-go was the inscrutably brilliant James Jamerson on bass, whose stamp on Motown records was further etched when he picked up a used Fender Precision electric bass, sharpening the edges of his untamed licks.

Because Gordy preferred to keep what he paid the musicians between him and them, he frequently avoided filing session logs to

the musicians' union, which normally determined how much the studio cats would be paid. "I took care of the union," says Stevenson without elaboration, "I had it all under control." As a result, there is no record of who played on the first, and later many other Temptations dates. It can be assumed, however, and confirmed by Otis Williams's memory, that Hunter, Jamerson, and the baleful-looking drummer Benny Benjamin were there, and probably two of the three regular guitarists, Robert White, Eddie "Chank" Willis, and Joe Messina (the jokingly self-described "token white" of the bunch), plus saxmen Mike Terry and Hank Cosby, trumpet men Herbie Williams and Marcus Belgrave, and the self-explanatory "Bongo" Eddie Brown.

As Otis recalls them, "Those guys were like a chain gang, especially Benny and James. They could *scare* you. They'd make you wet your drawers just by looking at you. We knew some of them from before, but they didn't really respect us young kids. They'd say, 'Oh shit, here come some more of those damn doo-wop singers.'

"Good as they were, they never made any mistakes, while we would ruin takes by singing off-key or something. So they'd get impatient with us, they'd say, 'You doo-woppers betta get it right, 'cause we ain't gonna be here all night.' The last thing they wanted to hear was a producer say, 'All right, take fifty-six . . .'"

"Oh, Mother of Mine" went down with reasonable dispatch, leaving so little an impression on Otis that he wrote in *Temptations* that Gordy had produced it, rather than Stevenson and Andre Williams (who were credited on the disc as "Dre-Mac"). Stevenson also was credited as a cowriter with Otis, which, justified or not, was a usual industry practice whereby record benefactors would jam in on the credits for royalty rewards (a prime example being Phil Spector).

Stevenson, trying to apply a still evolving Motown formula, wanted to "whiten" the almost James Brown-ish R&B cant of the song. But because Paul Williams's granular-throated vocal cords provided the opening, his searing intonation of the title phrase came out as undistilled R&B, though the gear-switching up-tempo flood of horns, drum, and piano riffs was meant to occupy poppy middle ground similar to that of the Cleftones' near identically titled hit "Little Girl of Mine."

If there was anything "Temptations-like" about "Mother," it was the coolly controlled lid to the energy of the song—and the ear-tickling trill of Eddie Kendricks's falsetto, which arose from nowhere late in

the tune for a brief solo turn. "That was no accident," says Stevenson. "I wanted to get him in there, with high impact. I knew Eddie would be an element that would have to be put to use." He was, too, on the second song cut at the session, "Romance Without Finance," penned by Eddie (though again Stevenson would crib a cowriting credit). A faint suggestion of "Money (That's What I Want)," it was produced by Stevenson and Williams as funky, New Orleans-style honky-tonk, and the delight was the polar-opposite vocal interplay of Paul and Eddie.

Both songs, inklings as they were of a future Motown signature, were misfires when released on July 24, 1961, as the A- and B-sides of the catalog-numbered Miracle 5. Stevenson and Gordy agreed that for all its energy "Oh, Mother" was middling, and few copies went out or were pitched to DJs. Nationally, the record was invisible.

Mickey was right. He *didn't* hold the key to the Temptations, just as no one yet did with the Supremes. As Motown would pan out as a company and a state of musical mind, finding those two keys would, as we know now, become more than twin treasure hunts. On a grand scale, no less than Motown's whole future depended on them.

5

The Further You Look, the Less You See

That **Motown** offered the time and room for its acts to grow surely cushioned the Temptations during their early grooming. And though they couldn't have anticipated just how stretched that commitment would be, for now, young and lean as they were, it was almost fun to knock around in the bohemian, starving-artist lifestyle.

Only Al Bryant among them thought it important to take an honest job. After marrying his girlfriend, Cynthia, and having a child, he began driving a milk truck to support his family. Melvin, at nineteen the baby of the group, still lived at home with Momma Rose and, warily, his stepfather. Paul and Eddie, seemingly always yoked, would crash on couches or floors in friends' homes. Even when Paul started a new romance with a young white girl and stayed at her place, a precondition was that Eddie would crash there too. After the relationship went sour, they both moved in with a Motown office worker, Lester Millard—sometimes with unpleasant consequences. One night when

Millard blasted his record player, neighbors called the cops, who ran in all three men for a sleepover in the hoosegow.

As for Otis, things were a bit more complicated. Up until a few months before the Motown audition, he'd been staying under his parents' roof in their apartment on Lucille Gardens Boulevard—that is, when he wasn't finding other beds to his liking while making the rounds as the neighborhood ladies' man. But his carefree life turned upside down late in 1960 when a family consisting of a mother and her two daughters moved into the building and his ever-roving eye caught the younger one, sixteen-year-old Josephine Rogers. Within days, they were an item, though such a coupling posed a clear risk for a nineteen-year-old male. This was confirmed when his apartment was empty one day and he whisked her into his bedroom. As he recalls with a grimace, “the rubber broke.” The other shoe dropped soon after when Jo told him she was pregnant.

That set into motion a blinding sequence initiated by her widowed mother, Lola. “She was a strict woman, she wasn't gonna cut me any slack. She told me, ‘You got my daughter pregnant, now you need to be a man.’” Even though there was nothing close to love between him and Jo, he promised he would do what his own father had not done back in Texarkana when he had knocked up Haze. Taking no chances, Lola hauled him before a family court judge, who lectured him and threatened to send him away if he didn't marry Jo. When he gave his word, the judge said, “That's mighty noble, young man. But *when?*”

“How long does it take to get across the street to city hall?” he cracked, to laughter in the gallery.

The joyless shotgun marriage began with the loveless couple moving to a cramped apartment on Pingree Road. For a time, to his great shame, they lived on welfare. “Not even for any money. They weren't giving out any money, just food stamps. I still have that welfare card, too. I kept it to remind myself of where I was at the time, which I never wanted to go back to.”

In June 1961, just before “Oh, Mother of Mine” was released, Jo gave birth to a son, Otis Lamont—“a beautiful child,” he beams, “all this thick hair and a pretty face, like a girl.” Otis the elder had as much as told Jo that he would be ending the charade of their marriage—“This just ain't gonna work,” he had said, with no argument from her. When the baby came, he relented and kept the union going, cringing at the idea of walking out on his son the way his father had on him.

And yet that would happen anyway. Hardly into fatherhood at his age, and with the Temptations' rebirth at Motown—not to mention the easy availability of women it brought him—both the marriage and the father-son relationship were doomed. Because Mickey Stevenson would send the group out on the road to build up a word-of-mouth following, Otis rarely had time for fatherhood. While Al Bryant found no difficulty in making time when the guys came back home, Otis was spending much more time with the group, rehearsing and poring over songs. Ruefully, he philosophizes, “I guess you could say that was the price of success.”

The Temptations, he admits, were his *real* marriage, as it would be through the years for Melvin, Paul, and Eddie. By now they even had pet names for each other. Otis was the suggestive “O.” A few years later when the racy French novel *The Story of O* was published in America, he'd say, not completely in jest, “That ain't nothing compared to the story of *this* O.” Melvin's love of the song “Volare” had him singing “*Nel blu dipinto di blu*” over and over, leading the guys to dub him “Signor Blue,” soon shortened to “Blue.” For Eddie, nothing could improve on Cornbread, given that he could pound away loaves of it without gaining an ounce on his bony frame. Paul, though, lost Smut when a new girlfriend pinned on him the term of endearment “Poopie,” something the others could not possibly let him forget.

Al wasn't included in this fraternity-style bonding ritual, for one thing because Al was itself a nickname, from the time he learned his real name was Elbridge, but also because he just didn't seem to get into the DNA chain of the group. Sensing this himself, rather than trying to bend to the ways of the others, he began pulling away from them. His ever-increasing alcohol consumption didn't help, as it turned him surlier, his words more caustic. Worse, his sweet tenor was becoming more strained. Clearly, with Al it was only a matter of when and how he'd be out of the picture.

But then, close as the other four Temptations were, they showed a remarkable propensity for not getting along. Like bickering brothers or soured spouses, they already were constantly finding reasons to snap at each other, and discrete orbits were forming. More than once, Eddie and Melvin squared off, fists flying, before Otis, Paul, and Al could separate them. Once they came at each other with weapons, Eddie wielding a can opener and Melvin a rock, but were disarmed

and, like the other times they grappled, quickly forgot what had set them off. Otis posits that the Eddie-Melvin contretemps was a symptom of Eddie's feeling that Melvin was a rubber stamp for Otis and thus a roadblock to Eddie and Paul having greater sway within the group.

"That was a whole psychological thing right from the early days," he says. "Eddie and Paul—Eddie much more so—felt they were 'add-ons.' But the thing was, I never felt that way. To me, they were coequals from the time they came in; it was their group as much as it was Melvin's and mine. Hell, Paul sang most of the leads. Melvin and I never had a problem with that 'cause it was best for the group. But things can get irrational when egos get in the way.

"I think Eddie came after Melvin because he didn't want to come after me. Melvin was young, a very sweet, quiet kid, and Eddie was older than us. Maybe he thought he should be making the decisions—even though I strove very hard to make it a team thing, with everybody having an equal vote—but in all our years together he never could be a leader, never *wanted* to be, to take that responsibility. So it fell to me to do that.

"But Melvin, he was nobody's lackey, man, and I always resented when someone said he was. If he stood with me, it's because he could see what needed to be done to keep it going. Listen, the only one out of all of 'em that helped me keep this group together was Melvin."

What's more, the Eddie-Melvin feud was hardly the only internal psychodrama. An even more complicated rivalry was going on between Eddie and his childhood chum Paul, Eddie's beef being that even though he'd actually brought Paul into the group, the latter seemed to think it was he who had "stuck it out" on their journey from Ensley and could pull rank on Eddie because of it. Fronting the group only gave Paul more attitude, and while he never stepped on Otis's authority, he came to exercise *his* when he was laying down the choreography, and blistered the others when they missed a step, sparking rounds of "Fuck you," "No, fuck *you*!" between him and his target.

Otis sincerely recalls Kendricks and Williams as "sweethearts" and "friendly, earthy, wonderful guys," adding, "I loved them dearly." He retains warm memories of him and Eddie picking over wings at the Kentucky Fried Chicken on Joy Road, then going across the street to a drugstore and standing at the comic book rack flipping through

Superman and *Captain Marvel* issues until they were shooed out. But he also got to know a different Eddie, one who could turn on him—"Mean Eddie," as he says. And Melvin, he admits, had a short fuse, perhaps made so by the tinderbox nature of his relationship with his stepfather, and "could lose it in a second." But the fireworks always seemed most intense when Paul and Eddie got into it.

"The first time I saw them scrap was after a show we did in Saginaw, Michigan. They got into an argument and from each one telling the other to go fuck himself it escalated to where they were gonna fight—and Eddie was holding something that looked like a knife. He was saying, 'Man, I been stabbed once, I ain't gonna be stabbed again!'

"I had to step in and break it up, and it faded, but after that I saw the scar on Eddie's stomach. It was nasty, too, all the way 'cross his belly. That's when I understood his fear about being a victim again. And why every time he felt threatened, he'd grab a weapon, a knife, a bottle, whatever was close. You'd have to calm him down to get him to drop it. He'd become a different person.

"You could say we were always living on the edge—and more so after David came into the group. The truth is, most of the time we put all the shit to the side and were extremely close, run through walls for each other." A laugh. "We were the only ones who could hate each other, know what I mean? If someone was a bastard, only *we* could say it.

"Because we knew how much was at stake, and we had to stick together to make it where we wanted to go. But I won't kid you. Sometimes it was rough going, to put it mildly."

The rewards were certainly worth fighting for. Good, God-fearing young Christians they may have been, but not to the extent that the call of the wild was left unanswered, with even the two mama's boys, Eddie and Melvin, eagerly succumbing to sins of the flesh. Avidly, Otis tells of some early Temptations club dates that were packed by women, black and white, who did little else during their performances but stare at their crotches, which generally tested the resiliency of their tight pants.

It soon dawned on them that this was how to determine which women were sure things for after-hours calisthenics, if not at their

places then in somebody's car in the parking lot—any port in a storm, as it were. “Let’s just say it was a learning experience,” guffaws Otis, who felt he’d earned his Ph.D. one night at a gig in Phelps, Michigan, when four sure shots shared a table just in front of the stage. One of them called him over. “You guys,” she said boldly, “are all hung.” Otis did a double take and said politely, “Thank you.” How five went into four is unclear, but he remembers that “each of them got her wish . . . and we got ours.”

Surprisingly, it was the fey-looking Eddie who got the most attention. “Everybody loved Eddie—especially women,” Otis says. “He’d take the microphone in his hand for a solo part and they’d lose their minds. They’d just swoon, fall down, moan and groan, all kinda carrying on.”

“I once asked a young lady what was it about him that made women crazy. I said, ‘Now, I’m not jealous, ’cause I get my own, but I can’t figure it out.’ And she said, ‘Well, Otis, Eddie’s got that little boy thing. We want to grab and hug him, mother him in bed.’”

The problem for the budding Temptations wasn’t getting some; it was getting some *hits*. No less than Berry Gordy was the next to take a crack at it. Having come recently to see the group’s potential based on “Oh, Mother of Mine,” he took another of their original songs, a last plea/declamation to an out-the-door lover with the hip title “Check Yourself.” Burnishing it, and thus earning the mandatory cowriting credit with Otis, Melvin, and Al, he produced the song at an October 28 session as a funky melange, with a slow, buttery opening line sung by Otis—“By and by, you know that you made me cry / My love for you will never die”—echoed by a near-subsonic Melvin, kicking into frenetic doo-wop with a mild bossa nova beat on the fringes and an imploring lead vocal by Paul—“Before we part, I’m sorry from my heart.”

An important rootstock of the song was that other Motown heavies laid hands on it, sans credit. Brian Holland, for one, volunteered some trenchant advice and sang in the chorus. “Anyone was apt to pitch in,” Mickey Stevenson points out. “It happened all the time; guys would be working in little side rooms, wander over to the studio, and pitch in. But the thing with the Temptations was, everyone loved these guys.”

Otis, in turn, was impressed by the collaborative mentality around the halls. While many have called Motown an “assembly line” or “black bubblegum”—he prefers the more cerebral “think tank,” adding, “We

really liked what they did with the song. Berry gave it depth, structure. And Gene Chandler later did a great cover of that song, he liked it so much.” But Berry wasn’t overly sold on it; released on November 7 with Gordy’s “Your Wonderful Love” on the flip side it was quickly here and gone, but with Gordy firmly committed to finding their bracket.

Just after the new year, he tried the basic approach, penning and producing a simple pop tune for Eddie to croon, “Dream Come True,” a somnolent love ballad with a faint cha-cha beat driven by James Jamerson’s fat and funky upright bass, a mournful organ, and a string section—or so it seemed then, and ever since to many Motown aficionados as the company’s first example of violin-laden soul. Incorrectly, it turns out. “Actually,” says Otis, “there weren’t any violins. It was Raynoma playing a harpsichord thing, a funky little piano that they overdubbed a few times and made it sound like a string sound. I watched her put it in later and I was amazed. She’s a talented lady, and she had a lot to do with a lot of those early Motown records.” (Actually, the instrument played by Liles was an Ondioline, an early type of synthesizer. For historical accuracy, Motown’s first use of strings on a record was on Gordy’s production of Eddie Holland’s early 1961 song “Jamie,” cowritten by Mickey Stevenson and Barrett Strong.)

The wonder is that the Temptations—as did the Funk Brothers—lived *down* to these kinds of undemanding compositions. The vocals were as bright and brilliant as any future Temptations works, fused in a symmetric, floating bubble with not a stray high or low note in the mix, Eddie reaching out of the mist with his falsetto. Decades later, Otis remarks, “I can’t get over how young we sound on those records—and how good. They just didn’t know what kind of record to exploit it right.”

Still, Gordy and company were getting closer to finding it. One positive note was that “Dream Come True,” backed by the Gordy fluff “Isn’t She Pretty,” with leads exchanged by all five Temptations, did not have to suffer the continuing indignity of the Miracle sticker. Cutting his losses with the pedestrian label, Gordy shuttered it after “Check Yourself,” on the stated excuse that it was too confusing that Smokey and the Miracles weren’t on it, and transferred the Temptations to the new eponymous Gordy Records. “Dream Come True” was its debut.

Not that this was a ticket to the penthouse. Gordy Records was then just another repository for overflow acts, its other early entries

being the likes of Lee and the Leopards, Mike and the Modifiers, Hattie Littles, and a white group, the Valadiers. Not until almost a year later did a viable act other than the Temptations record for the label, a girl group called Martha and the Vandellas, fronted by a former backup singer and Mickey Stevenson secretary, Martha Reeves. They rang in a Top 30 hit in mid-1963 with "Come and Get These Memories."

The Temptations, however, did get a critical boost when "Dream Come True" begat an odd but telling public response when their unsinkable soul, blended with conscious white pop, buoyed the record onto the chart—the *R&B* chart, its acceptance among black buyers sending it to No. 22 in early spring 1962. This, the first chart appearance for the group, was vindication for Stevenson, who nonetheless saw it as merely a tease.

"See, we were still learning a lot about how to go with them, a little more each time out of the box," he says. "The songs may not have been that strong, but we knew with 'Dream Come True' that they could take a pop song and give it a powerful R&B feel so we'd have the best of both worlds, market-wise. We didn't need to write them R&B songs to make the point that they were black singers who could sing anything and appeal to blacks and whites. That was no mean feat; very few singers can do that, do what Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson did later."

While Stevenson says, "We were still getting around it, we weren't there yet," the record moved them a bit further up the ladder and kept Gordy high on them. For their next record, he sent producer Clarence Paul into the studio on September 24 to have them cut a cover of "Mind Over Matter (I'm Gonna Make You Mine)," a recent local hit by the Diablos, an R&B group fronted by Barrett Strong's cousin, Nolan Strong, that recorded on Fortune Records, the label run out of a barbershop. For Paul, the session was more or less a moonlighting gig. Born Clarence Pauling, the brother of the legendary "5" Royales guitarist Lowman Pauling, he had been a respected soul singer with the Royales and came to Motown as mentor of the blind wunderkind he had discovered, Steveland Morris, whom he renamed Stevie Wonder. While Stevie naturally was Clarence's pet project, because his bag was giving a bluesy gospel feel to traditional pop, Gordy had him cut "Mind Over Matter" to bring out both elements, black and white. This he did, effectively, as well as bringing Eddie down in key to a more mature sounding-level on his lead vocal.

However, when Gordy released the song in October, it was with a bizarre twist—the group name on the record wasn't the Temptations but the *Pirates*. This stands as one of Motown's most inexplicable decisions ever, calling into question Gordy's sanity in making the move—an opinion Mickey Stevenson willingly seconds. As if feeling an old wound flaring up, when reminded of the anomaly, he moans, "Oh my, that was just *terrible*. I don't know where the hell that came from. We had about four or five stupid-ass names like that we could have used. Even we didn't realize how great 'Temptations' was. Look, we all make mistakes, brother. And that was a beaut. We just wanted so badly to break those guys out. So we tried to find a marriage for the look, the sound, the group. But maybe we tried *too* hard. Maybe we *did* lose our minds for a little bit."

The suddenly shorn Temptations couldn't believe it. "Berry said, 'We're gonna try with you guys as the Pirates,' and our mouths flew open. Then he said, 'If it's a hit, you guys'll be the Pirates from now on, no more Temptations.' I mean, sure, we wanted a hit, but it was like, the *Pirates*? They got to be kidding. We wanted no part of that. No way we wanted to come out with eye patches and swords."

One can—praise the Lord—only imagine how the history of modern music would have been altered had the Temptations brand expired in 1962. In retrospect, fate could not have stood by for that ignominy. Instead, the record, which moved Gordy so little that he released it in October as a one-off on a lightweight, short-lived sublabel, Mel-o-Dy, soon died a quick death (not to see daylight again until its appearance on *Emperors of Soul*). Breathing the same extended sigh of relief ever since, Otis avers, "I'm much happier to go down in history as a Temptation than a Pirate."

At the same time, it meant yet another failure for the group, one that was somewhat ameliorated when, almost concurrently as a safety valve, Gordy issued a song he'd cut with them back in August. This one, "Paradise," a nimble cha-cha confection fronted by Eddie and right out of the girl group playbook—think the Marvelettes' "Beachwood 4-5789"—was released under their rightful name and happily paid a dividend when it landed them on the pop chart for the first time, though one would have had to look hard to find it at

No. 122, and harder still on the R&B chart, where it never arrived due to its severe pop tilt.

Small solace that the charting was, it was even smaller in light of a decidedly inopportune snafu that seemed to taunt the group's elusive quest for a real hit. It happened when Gordy that same September wrote a song he believed was suited to the Temptations. He left messages for them to report to Hitsville, but they went unanswered. The irony was that they were mere blocks away, on 14th Street, sitting in the pews at King Solomon's Baptist Church taking in a gospel music concert featuring the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Harmonizing Four, the Swan Silvertones, and the Highway QCs. Not willing to wait until they surfaced, Gordy cut the song with a lesser, harder-edged Motown soul group, the Contours.

"We came in after the show and they told us, 'Man, Berry was looking for you,' and about him taking the Contours instead," says Otis. "We didn't think much of it. We had nothin' against the Contours, we loved them, we wanted them to get ahead, too. But we didn't know that because of the damn song, they'd get ahead of *us*."

And, for a time, by plenty. Because on September 22—the same day that Motown released both "Mind Over Matter" and "Paradise"—it also sent into the market a hot Contours record, a nonsensical but infectious tribal screamfest called "Do You Love Me," which screamed all the way to No. 3 a month later.

"The thing is," Otis muses, "I don't know if we could have done as good a job on it. That's what was so amazing about Motown. They just seemed to get the right people to sing those songs—even if they had to get lucky to do it. I wouldn't even call it luck, because it happened too much to be luck. It was something meant to be, which is the way I feel about the Temptations. I imagine Paul would have sung lead on that song if we'd done it, and it would have been another kind of flavor. But could anyone have blasted it out like Billy Gordon did?"

That the cosmos still hadn't aligned for the Temptations by late 1962 didn't faze Gordy or Mickey Stevenson. "No one was any less committed to them," Mickey says. "As they kept on recording, man, you kept hearing it, what it was about them." And now, as a fresh face took a turn at extracting the ore and laying it into grooves on their next records, it would mark an epochal turning point. Enter Smokey Robinson.

Perhaps the most indelible marker of Gordy's luck was the remarkable unfolding of Robinson as a hydra-headed creature who took his own group and other Motown artists far beyond anything Gordy could have imagined in 1959. As frontman for the Miracles, of course, he'd sung the company's first hit, "Shop Around," and as writer and producer had delivered a string of hits for its first female solo star, Mary Wells, including plaintive pop baubles about love's complexities like "Two Lovers" and "You Beat Me to the Punch," which used deftly light Latin rhythms and clever lyrical hooks.

By late 1962, Robinson was a master at his craft, or crafts, and his loyalty to Gordy was immutable. Offered a million-dollar deal by another record company to jump from Motown, he not only turned it down without a second thought but was aghast anyone would even *think* he would leave his benefactor, who, while paying him Cheese Nips compared to his own earnings, reciprocated Robinson for remaining in place by making him vice president of Motown. If that for now was merely a paper position, Robinson would hold it for the next three decades, with far greater enrichment in future years, not leaving until Gordy himself did.

There were many whispered japes about how far Smokey's nose was burrowed up Gordy's posterior, but no one ever doubted his massive abilities or his quixotic commitment to the company. Indeed, Robinson willingly sacrificed the continued upward progress of his own group, which was easily Motown's most popular act into the middle of the decade, to keep the entire Motown ship on a steady course. In addition to Wells, he composed songs for the Marvelettes, Marvin Gaye, the Contours, and, at Gordy's increasingly desperate behest, the Supremes, though it seemed his "magic touch," to use a line from one of his Marvelettes songs, ran out with them. Smokey was unable to find the proper light pop-soul mix for his own—and soon Gordy's—partner in adultery, Diane Ross.

It was only natural, then, that Berry would encourage his brilliant adjutant to give it a go with the Temptations. It was an especially appetizing pairing given that the eerie similarity in vocal tone and timbre between Robinson and Eddie Kendricks was such that Kendricks-fronted Temptations records would for years be confused with those of the Miracles, not an unwelcome phenomenon as it likely helped boost sales. The teaming was also a logical one because both

he and the Tempts had an almost organic way with a song, relying less on prefabricated planning than their spontaneous “feel” for melody and harmony.

“With Smokey,” relates Mickey Stevenson, “everything flowed from the center—from the *song*, not a blueprint. “It was all about the song and how it grew on the spot. Most producers would come in with charts, chord sheets, and all that, with the breaks and the exact notes, a drum roll here, a bell there, and somewhere in all that shit try to find a melody, a heart.

“Smokey would come in with a lyric, a melody in his head, and the harmonies. He’d sit at the piano with the group and let them get a feel for it, and go over it until every part was right, then go in and cut it real fast, before anyone lost the feel. One or two takes, although I remember him having to go on and on with Mary before she got it right.

“It was really a love of music, rather than making a product. And the Temptations really excelled when they could just sing how they felt. Hell, they could sing anything, so with them it was like, ‘Hey, just turn on the damn microphone and get outta the way.’”

Smokey had gotten the Temptations in the studio at least as early as June 1962, producing a song of his called “Slow Down Heart.” As Stevenson recalls, this was another spin of the wheel in search of the right fit for them. “We made it a point at our A&R meetings to assign all the producers to do something on the Temptations. Anybody that wanted to could, ‘cause even though these guys had no hits, they were great. I’d say, ‘Everybody, give me one or two songs for them.’ So that was Smokey’s.”

Robinson had wanted to get in on the Temptations, breezily recalling in his cheerfully politic 1989 autobiography *Inside My Life* that “I loved that group,” though he was a tad confused about their dual derivations and chronology, adding, “I knew them back before they were the Primes, when they were the Distant. I liked the way the cats looked, each of them tall, thin and handsome. I called them the Five Deacons and grooved on their inventive background blends.” But he made no mention of “Slow Down Heart,” an airy pop love bonbon with flutes, high harmonies, and a suave, less pebbly-throated Paul Williams on lead—“Slow down heart, you’re beating much too fast,” went his plaint. Nor did it raise Gordy’s pulse much, and he relegated it to the B-side of “Paradise.” Clearly, Smokey thought he could do better.

• • •

First, though, *they* had to get better, too. In the grand context of Motown, the Temptations still were not, as Junior Walker sang in “Shotgun,” “prime time.” Indeed, when Gordy and Esther Edwards hatched an ambitious eleven-week caravan of Motown acts over the last two months of 1962—a venture originally called the Hitsville Motor City Tour but soon familiarized as the Motortown Revue—the Tempts did not make the cut, far out of the class of headliners like Smokey and the Miracles, Mary Wells, Marvin Gaye and the Marvelettes, and, a rung behind, not only rising acts like the Contours and Little Stevie Wonder but also fading veterans like Singing Sammy Ward and Marv Johnson. Or for that matter the Supremes, who were just as hitless as the Temptations—to the extent that Diane Ross, Mary Wilson, and Florence Ballard were being ragged around Motown as the “No-Hit Supremes.” But they had the No-Hit Temptations beat in one critical respect: Gordy’s building obsession with Ross, and his efforts to constantly placate her. Thus the Supremes were added to the Revue as a charity case, though they received no billing on the theater marquees.

To be left out in the cold as nearly all of Motown became a traveling minstrel show had to hurt. As it happened, they wound up getting an invite after all, but it was cold comfort. It happened at the crux of the jaunt, which began on November 2 when two barely functioning buses crammed with performers, musicians, roadies, and chaperones rolled off to destinations east and south, in inner-city theaters and suburban venues like high school gyms and VFW halls. At great peril, the middle of the journey went straight into the dark heart of Jim Crow country, in Alabama and Mississippi at the height of the pre-Civil Rights Act maelstrom. There they became familiar with the most pernicious sign of the times—ropes, which were used at some dates to segregate white and black audiences and at other times could be seen hanging from trees, either to deliver a message or because the nooses had been freshly used.

If those haunting sights weren’t searing enough, one time as the troupe was boarding the buses after giving the first concert for an integrated audience ever held in Birmingham, Alabama, they heard sharp popping noises. “Them’s bullets!” shouted bandleader Choker Campbell, prompting a stampede onto the bus that nearly trampled Mary Wells. A little later, the driver stopped, got out, and noticed two holes in the “Motor Town Tour” banner on the side. Looking closely, he

dug out two bullets. Another time, while attempting to use a gas station bathroom, they were chased away by the attendant running toward the bus pointing a double-barreled shotgun. And it only got worse when just before, of all days, Thanksgiving, in Greenville, South Carolina, horn player Beans Bowles, who had booked the musicians, and road manager Eddie McFarland drove ahead of the company in a station wagon. Both had been drinking, and soon after leaving McFarland fell asleep at the wheel and plowed head-on into a truck, shearing off the entire front end of the car and being decapitated. Bowles, riding in the back, was pulled out, both of his legs and one of his arms mangled, a flute that he'd been holding pushed through his armpit and jutting from the back of his neck. (Somehow, a satchel stuffed with \$12,000 in cash from the last show was recovered intact, its contents undisturbed.)

Dazed, weary, and in a shroud of mourning for McFarland—fortunately, Bowles would recover from his devastating injuries—the Revue doubled back up the coast to New York for the crème brûlée of the tour, a ten-day, thrice-a-day run at Harlem's venerable Apollo Theater, easily the most prestigious venue for any black act, where the halls still echoed with the joyous noise from recent engagements by Ray Charles and James Brown and His Famous Flames. For Gordy, the only more important objective than seeing his stable play the Apollo was getting them onto national television. It was a real coup, for instance, when Marvin Gaye was invited on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* and lip-synched "Stubborn Kind of Fellow" on October 22, and Mary Wells was slated to go on the show after the tour. But it was a wet dream when the Marvelettes appeared on no less than *The Ed Sullivan Show* on March 5, singing "Twistin' Postman" live.

So struck was Gordy with the impact of these boob-tube showcases in an age of burgeoning visual images of rock and roll that he decided to record jointly on tape and film one of the Apollo concerts, under his supervision, to be released as both a live album and a movie short for theaters to show prior to the main feature. For this he wanted to capture not only the wild, sweaty, out-of-control excitement of a Motown show but reproduce as best he could the tonal nuances of the records onstage. Before, for example, Mary Wells had sung two of her hits, "Bye Bye Baby" and "Two Lovers," sans the backup male chorus of the records. Needing to add it now, Gordy caught a break when the Temptations happened to be at a gig at a club in Brooklyn. When

the Revue pulled into Harlem on December 7, Gordy summoned the group and hurriedly rehearsed them with Wells. However, there would be an odd man out for the show—Al, who was told his voice wouldn't be required. As Otis tells it, this was no reflection on Bryant nor a big deal. "What happened was, the songs were recorded with three-part harmony in the background, with one tenor, so Berry went with Eddie, and used Melvin because you had to have a bass singer onstage."

Although Otis insists, "Al was cool with it," one wonders if Bryant—whose drinking had grown into a festering problem, and with it his general unpleasantness—privately burned under the collar at having to stand backstage as his own group went on for the show. "Hey," Otis says with a laugh, "Al had it easy. He got to watch. We had to go on, and we were scared shitless out there before one of those tough Apollo crowds."

Not that this can be detected by viewing the grainy film of the show nearly half a century later. With aplomb, clad in sleek black suits and open-necked white shirts, they strode onto the stage, toting a microphone around which they broke into an a cappella preamble of "Two Lovers," before Wells emerged and began the number in earnest. Providing perfect backing, they broke into nifty little moves, coolly bending back at the waist between lines with a hip flick of the wrist, and adding to the big wind-up of "Bye Bye Baby" with foot-stomping and hand-clapping, at times keeling way over, their hands touching their shiny shoe tops. They even got a nice shout-out at the end from the emcee, who pealed, "Let's hear it for Miss Mary Wells and the Temptations!"

They had little time to savor this small taste of the big time. As soon as they came offstage, they were in a car headed back to Brooklyn. Soon after, they were on the road in the sticks, again as backup singers, this time for Eddie Holland after "Jamie" became a hit, riding with him in his silver Cadillac—another reminder of the kind of spoils they *didn't* have.

On their own gigs, mostly around Detroit, their wheels were provided by Momma Rose or Al if he could talk his wife into letting him appropriate their car. Otherwise it was the ones under the Greyhound buses or midnight trains, such as semiregular overnights to Cleveland, a favorite stepping-stone market for Gordy to gauge the popularity potential of his rising acts outside of the advantageous turf of the Motor

City. However, on one such sojourn there, at the Keith 105 nightclub, the Temptations were made painfully aware of their shortcomings.

Having opened the show, they hung in the wings watching—to their dismay—the other acts on the marquee, including Gladys Knight and the Pips. This was the pre-Motown Pips, but even then a seasoned bunch, dating back to 1952 when Gladys was eight years old. Singing as a quintet at the time, they'd migrated from their native Atlanta to record in New York on the Veejay label, nailing a No. 6 hit, "Every Beat of My Heart," in 1961, and toured with Jackie Wilson. Tutored in choreography by veteran Broadway hooper Charles "Cholly" Atkins, the Pips were a finely tuned unit, stepping light and fancy in intricate routines mirroring the lyrics they sang. That, of course, was something Paul Williams did with the Temptations, but as the boys watched they realized there was a canyon separating them and the Pips.

Not mincing words, Otis recalls, "It was a big club, like five hundred people, and was like the Apollo in that they'd tell you, brutally, if they thought you sucked. And they just booed our asses off the stage."

At Motown, Mickey Stevenson had already taken stock of the act and began to crack the whip. "I'm not a choreographer," he says, "but I knew what you had to do to get a reaction on a stage. And I had those guys practically living with me at my house for months whipping 'em into shape. Listen, what Paul did with his routines was terrific, but it was hard for all of them to stay together. They'd get a little ragged. They'd lose focus. And Melvin had a clubfoot, he walked on the sides of his feet, so he wouldn't do those little pirouettes they did. He'd stay back while everyone moved up. It was out of sync. I said, 'Melvin, you can do it, just keep working on it.' And he did, and slowly he got better. And I wouldn't let them go to any gig until it was all in place."

There would be more fine-tuning of moves to come, with the aid of important new Motown hires, but for now that phase of the operation was in order. Yet all of it would be immaterial in the long run unless Smokey could come up with that long-overdue hit record.

But before that could happen, it wouldn't be through a new Motown hand but by the group itself that the missing talisman was found.

6

It's Growing

The first piece of vinyl the Temptations recorded in 1963 was easily their most portentous, if only for the credits on the label. The song, wordily titled "The Further You Look, the Less You See," was cowritten by Smokey Robinson and the sweet-talkin' guy from the pool halls, Norman Whitfield, who had talked his way up from playing tambourine at the "Come On" session onto the Motown roster of behind-the-scenes talent on a menu of bravado and bull.

The Silver Fox had, in a way, been working on it for several years, by unwittingly moving closer to the Temptations' circle, at first by proxy. Following their steps by ingratiating himself with Johnnie Mae Matthews, he began producing his own compositions and eventually those for other acts. One such gig, for Thelma Records, the label owned by Berry Gordy's ex-wife, had him cutting a group fronted by Richard Street, who after losing out on the Temptations' Motown elevation had returned to singing by reconstituting the sundered Distantss, including Mooch Harrell, under the name of Richard Street and the Distantss. To complete the ring of interconnected DNA, Whitfield produced for them a cover of the original Distantss song, "Always," which Johnnie Mae of course owned, as well as the Distantss name, allowing her a cut on any action the song generated.

Gordy hired Whitfield when Motown bought out Thelma, then informed the Tempts their next song would be the one Norman had written for them, and that Smokey had applied the finishing touches. Mickey Stevenson remembers it well. "Norman, man, that sonofabitch was pushy," he says. "He didn't want to wait for success. He was the most impatient guy I ever saw. Actually, I brought Norman in so he could learn the ropes. I told him, 'My brother, keep watchin', waitin', and learnin'.' And it took him about a year before he was rushing into my office with songs. And when other producers would add things to them, make them better, he didn't like that. But I said, 'Norman, everybody helps each other around here. Don't throw away what Smokey puts in, learn why he put it in.'"

"The Further You Look" impressed Gordy enough to let the near-neophyte produce it with the Temptations. On January 4, Whitfield cut the yearning ballad with an emotional lead vocal by Paul, who opened the song oozing, "Many a man has run away, many a man has gone astray/Searching for the treasures of a love that's true / I'm hoping that treasure can be you." Dressed up by vibes and horns, the tune still came out a tad too much down-and-dirty R&B for Gordy's tastes, and on January 21 Stevenson took the group back in and produced a song he'd written, "Witchcraft (For Your Love)," with a more debonair, Lou Rawls-style lead by Paul. But that too came up short, and when Smokey soon after came in with his next Temptations song they were rushed back yet again on January 30 for another session.

The song, "I Want a Love I Can See," had the classic elements Smokey had perfected with Mary Wells: a body-moving cha-cha beat, funky piano licks, kicky horns and bongos, and gushy, cleverly turned lyrics—here with Paul demanding "the kind of love that will never grow old, the kind of love that can be felt." It was certainly poppy enough, and though Stevenson goes no further than "that was an okay song, no more," Gordy released it on March 18 with "The Further You Look" on the B-side. Short-shrifting it in his memoirs, Smokey merely mentioned in passing that the song "sold locally," and in fact the buzz in Detroit seemed to presage a breakout for the group. But not given a high priority by the Motown PR and sales force, the record only alighted briefly on the chart, at No. 122, not exactly what Gordy or the boys had in mind for their second appearance on the pop side of the chart (although the milestone would create a fondness in Otis for the song

that led him to rerecord it as “A Love I Can See” on the Temptations’ 2001 *Awesome* album).

After nearly two years of famine, the Tempts were undeniably closer to a turning point, but now it was becoming obvious that time might run out on them, and that the group was at a crossroads. For people around Motown, there was a hazy feeling that something else was needed to juice them, though what it was no one really knew. However, they could see one thing they didn’t need: Al Bryant.

Much like Pete Best in the protoplasmic days of the Beatles, Al was assumed to be a fixed piece of the Temptations mechanism. There was no issue with his high, sugary alto or his moves, and with his engaging stage persona he was a favorite of many in the group’s still finite fan base. Even within the Tempts, there was no appetite to dump him for his drinking and caustic barbs. It was more a faint notion, never discussed openly, that Al somehow wasn’t operating on the same wavelength as the others.

Even so, throughout 1963 he was a fixture as they treaded through another lean year, their small strides continuing to create a word-of-mouth following. In fact, they were on the road so often, laying roots all around the Midwest, East Coast, and South that they found only enough time to cut one other song deemed worthy of release. That was the Gordy-written and -produced “Farewell My Love,” a soundalike of “I Want a Love I Can See,” which had Paul and Eddie hand off lead parts to each other and a novel—for then—spoken “rap” by Paul on the break. Issued in late May with Gordy’s middling “May I Have This Dance” on the flip, it died with little notice.

If there was any solace for the now habitually underachieving records, it was that on the club circuit they had become an upperscale act. On these sojourns, the Tempts could strut their stuff, lording it over the competition—including, with great satisfaction, one show at the Royal Theater in Baltimore when they ran up against their nemeses Gladys Knight and the Pips, bare months after being shown up by them. This time, Otis notes with glee, “We turned the tables and blew them away. We felt we had to do that because we were still hearing about that last show. Not to down them, but we’d just gotten so much better. I remember everything was clicking that night. Paul

improvised this one move where he got down real low, almost to the ground, and began scooting across the stage, like a Chuck Berry duck-walk. And we all followed him, and the women were all swooning 'cause of our tight pants and all.

"Gladys and them didn't know what they could do after that, and when the show was over a stagehand came up to us and said Gladys and the Pips caught hell from their manager for being overshadowed by us. Paul said, 'Hey, that'll teach them to fuck with the Temptations!'"

If touring became their *raison d'être*, it also became their lifeblood, as the only way for them to make any kind of income. While ITMI was extricating commissions and unspecified expenses, just through attrition the boys were accumulating appearance fees and sometimes advances for travel and lodging. It wasn't exactly Smokey and the Miracles money, but it was welcome, and enough for them to pool their cash and buy wheels for their travels, an old Ford station wagon—a long way from the Miracles' Cadillac touring car but a notch above the Motown acts still bound to the bus and the train for their road trips. The struggling Supremes, by dint of Gordy's largesse, were given a driver/bodyguard to ferry them about yet otherwise seemed like poor relations next to the Tempts. Indeed, when Diane took some time off over the summer of 1963 to visit relatives in Alabama, she hitched a ride with them when they set out on a southern road swing en route to a wind-up gig at the Royal Peacock nightclub in Atlanta. As Otis recalls, it was no joyride.

"We arranged to drop her off in Bessemer, Alabama, and pick her up on our way back home. And all the way down and back, we had to reassure her that she wasn't going to be a failure, tell her to keep at it and it would happen for her."

A laugh. "It was crazy when you think about it. Because who were we? We didn't have any hits either. But we realized that's how people saw us, as a success because of our club act. We had a car, we had sold-out shows. But to us, there was a big hole. We thought, boy, if we could just get that one hit, all hell was gonna break loose."

As it was, they could go back to their breeding grounds of the South with a certain cachet, as favorite sons. Before dropping off Ross, they detoured, following the trail of mill smoke to Ensley, where Paul and Eddie had arranged to drop in on their families.

"God, I remember that. The whole neighborhood greeted them like they were the biggest stars in the world," recalls Joe Williams. "They

came in this canary yellow station wagon, and when they pulled into the driveway everybody was cheering 'em, slapping hands with 'em."

When the Temptations played the Royal Peacock, Paul and Eddie's parents made the drive to catch the show. "I got a picture taken that night," Joe says. "My mother and father and Eddie's mother and father. The look on their faces is priceless, man. They were as proud as could be."

Motown, which in many respects was reflective of the Kennedy-era nostrums of optimism and youthful productivity—Gordy, perceiving that his own Camelot was a black cultural awakening critical to the civil rights cause, that summer released an album of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech—suffered a collective kick to the solar plexus when the bulletins came in from Dallas on November 22. That grim day, the Temptations were enjoying a rare spell at home, Otis in particular. "I was making love with my wife. I remember that because the TV was on and when it happened we stopped and sat on the edge of the bed and didn't move the whole day."

Like everyone else, those at Motown mourned throughout that dolorous weekend—with the lone exception, it seems, of Marvin Gaye, who even as the horrible news bled from radios on that bleak Friday had argued with an exasperated Gordy over money, causing the latter to, by some accounts, pin him by the neck to a wall, saying, "Don't you realize the president was killed today?" No one really knew how the sudden loss of American innocence might affect history, theirs and of music in general, but they had to carry on somehow.

At the time, Gordy's second Motortown Revue was about to embark on a monthlong jaunt, and this time the Temptations made the cut—not for the tour as a whole but to join the troupe at the Apollo Theater Christmas week finale, at which another concert movie would be filmed. Clearly Gordy wanted the hitless Temptations to be woven into the Motown brand, even if their dearth of hits eliminated them from the hit-parade shows along the tour route. At the Apollo, room would be made for them to go on not as a backup group but in their own right, with no one left backstage—though for Al Bryant the prospect of stepping onto the Apollo boards seemed less than enticing.

Cornelius Grant, a young Motown guitarist who'd backed them the year before on their Mary Wells gig, accompanied the group to

New York in their station wagon. Much as Diane Ross had grouched all through their trip south, Al wouldn't stop complaining on this one. "They had a problem with Al," he says "He kept bitching and moaning about how he didn't need to do this anymore, he had a job in a dairy and all the travel was interfering with that. He'd say, 'Why do we have to go to New York?'"—which was strange because how could you not be excited about playing the Apollo? But all Al wanted to do was drink and talk shit. Let's say Al didn't seem to be very group-oriented."

If Al was residually bitter about being kept offstage the last time, Otis insists it's news to him. By contrast, he says of that trip, "I don't remember him saying anything like that around the rest of us" and that "we were all excited about coming to work at the Apollo."

When they got to the sanctified landmark on 125th Street, the romance of the ghetto palace clashed with the reality: an ancient, dank music hall with corridors reeking of urine. Worse, as lowest act on the Motortown Revue totem pole, the Temptations had to climb five long flights of stairs to get to their assigned dressing room, leaving them winded and Al even surlier. This peonic treatment hardly eased the group's stage fright, which was stoked by tales of horror they'd heard about the Apollo audiences, how they'd hoot and howl at acts they didn't like, and about the management's medieval methods of rejection. "Supposedly," Otis says, "they had this trapdoor onstage. It would open and you'd find yourself going through the floor while you sang." And of course, there was the guy with the big hook who would come out and physically remove you.

Most of it was literally urban myth—save for the hook, actually a broom, wielded by the dreaded "executioner" on amateur-night shows to sweep rejects away. Still, it was a rough crowd. After the Supremes' first show there, Diane Ross was so upset by a few catcalls that she came off shaking and in tears, moaning, "They hated us. They hated me." Incredibly, no less than Smokey and the Miracles had bombed in their first Apollo gig and were booed from the stage, leading the hoary owner of the theater, Frank Schiffman, to demand that Gordy return the Miracles' advance. (Gordy talked him out of it, telling Schiffman he'd soon be begging to have the group back.) And just before the Tempts went on, they saw a dejected Singing Sammy Ward packing up his bags backstage.

"I said, 'What happened, man? The show just started,'" Otis recalls. "Sammy said, 'They didn't like me. They're shippin' me back

home.' They could do that if they didn't like you. Berry was in no position to do anything about it. So we were petrified."

Doused in a cold sweat, they went on in their best duds—lime green suits, white shoes—and began shakily. Rather than letting it all out as usual, they were rather tentative, making the crowd restless as they slogged through "Dream Come True." Ironically, it was Al who saved them, loosening things up by taking the microphone and doing an impromptu rap in a comical cadence à la the Coasters' "Shopping for Clothes," garnering laughs and cheers that put everyone at ease. Gathering up nerve and verve for their second and final number, "I Want a Love I Can See," they closed big and left to healthy applause.

They owed Al a lot for that save, and in fact he received his due. The Apollo would create a photographic collage of each act for sale in the lobby each day. The one of the Temptations for the remaining dates of the ten-day Motortown run featured a shot of the lanky Bryant in the center, alone, doing his comic bit. But while that must have turned Al's head, fate planned one last piece of business before the Temptations were ready for their close-up—which involved that same head being put on a stick.

As of late 1963, that profound piece was floating around the periphery of the Motown academy, not really fitting in anywhere despite what everyone knew to be massive talent both as a soul-shaking gospel and blues singer and as a long, tall, rubber-limbed showman. At the time, David Ruffin may have seemed like just another in the wide pool of novice wannabes. In reality, however, he had already lived, and in some critical ways his soul was mutilated by, a life orotund with, let's say, episodes that most of the old storytellers in the barbershops could never have invented, or in some cases would never have wanted to. What most mattered, to him and to the future of music, was that he had put in time singing gospel and the blues tooth by jowl with some of the big boys in the business while meandering through the musical back alleys of the South.

Most of those who hung with him knew of this pedigree, but not much else other than that there was a vague mystery about him that at times tripped the wire of outright weirdness. No one really knew

why, though it seemed fairly obvious that such revelatory answers were rooted in another place and time.

That time began on January 18, 1941, when he was born Davis Eli Ruffin in an unincorporated Mississippi town populated mainly by indigent blacks, five miles from the state's southeastern border. The place was called Whynot, which sounds like a joke but is as real as other curiously named southern towns as Blue Balls, Arkansas, and Inter-course, Alabama, or for that matter, So So, Chunky, and Possunneck, Mississippi. Ruffin, once he'd gotten out, usually just told people he was from Meridian, fifteen miles down Interstate 59 in Lauderdale County, making it a little easier for him to erase what it so pained him to remember—not just the depressing lifelessness of Whynot and the shack he lived in that had no electricity nor indoor plumbing, but for pain that was all too real, and the man who had inflicted it.

That man was Eli Ruffin, a knotty, briny man with a lovely voice—exactly the traits that he would pass on to his son. A sharecropper and yet another of the Temptations' fatherly backwoods preachers, in 1935 he took a wife named Ophelia in Collinswood, Mississippi, and settled in with her and her five-year-old son Quincy. A year later, she gave birth to a daughter, Rosetta, who contracted scarlet fever and died a day after her first birthday. Another daughter, Rita Mae, arrived, then in 1939 a son, Jimmy Lee. Eli then moved the brood to Whynot, but when Davis was born it took a grievous toll on Ophelia, who died eleven months later of a bad heart. Eli rebounded by marrying a comely teacher from the town's one-room schoolhouse named Earline, who had her hands full caring for one-year-old Davis. He had both rheumatic fever and asthma, and as she related years later before her death in 2001, she would “pound him on his skinny little back” then reach into his throat and “pull out strings of mucus” so he'd be able to breathe.

Eli was of little help. Tartly, she recalled, he “did not support” his children, his paternal role being to mete out punishment to the kids. According to the oldest, his stepson Quincy, Eli would waste no time wielding an eight-inch rawhide leather whip—uncomfortably like those of a century before used by slave masters on the plantations—to wickedly batter them. At times, Quincy added, Eli would also use the whip on his dogs and even the hogs and chickens he kept in the yard. Quincy wouldn't go so far as to say Eli took his whip to his wives, but it seems not a great stretch.

All the Ruffins learned to endure such brutality silently, knowing how easily he could snap. The silence extended, as well, to something even more egregious, something that none would ever publicly talk about. This, the Ruffin family secret, was first broached gingerly in a self-published memoir by Ruffin's longtime on-and-off girlfriend and mother of his only son, Genna Sapia-Ruffin, who has taken his surname though the two were never married. In the book about their habitually stormy relationship, *David Ruffin: My Temptation*, she wrote, "For years, I tried to discover kernels of truth about his childhood—all we really know is that it was a mystery [but] it remains the secret which I believe set him on his path of self-ruin," adding that among the mystery were "vague insinuations about some kind of sexual abuse as a toddler, and older as well. I was not there, so obviously I have no facts to quote, but suffice it to say that I believe he had a traumatic childhood [and] he seemed to have never gotten over it." These, the deepest of his childhood scars, she said, were "the catalyst for a very, very emotionally disturbed adult. That is, in fact, exactly what he became."

His older brother Jimmy, who was himself to become a Motown star, briefly, with his shimmering 1966 hit "What Becomes of the Brokenhearted," has kept mostly mum about David Ruffin in general over the years, and particularly about any such demented family secrets. However, the ubiquitous Billy Wilson of the Motown Alumni Association says that during periodic conversations with Jimmy in the 1970s he learned of some hair-raising details—as he did with David as well.

"I was the only person David and Jimmy ever talked to about all that crazy shit. They didn't even tell their wives what they told me. It was in confidence, of course. But I'll tell you this: it ain't a pretty story. Eli, the old man, he was a pervert. And that's not my word for him—it was David's. He said, 'My father was a pervert.' It's true what Genna wrote. What happened back in Mississippi fucked up David's life. He couldn't live with the shame and guilt. It affected everything he did."

For example, Ruffin had serious hang-ups about homosexuality, which he attempted to sweep out of his conscious mind by treating women the way a "real man" would, screaming tirades about doing violence to "faggots." If this screwed-up pathology had a positive side effect, it was the prowling, panting sexual animal he would turn into onstage, which could also be heard in his recorded vocals.

Whatever happened to him behind closed doors, Davis Eli Ruffin was never quite whole because of it. Even had it never happened, though, there was enough abuse on other levels that would have left holes in his psyche. In his father's eyes, he was always a reject. While the other children were hardy and big-boned, Davis was a runt. By the time he was six, Earline had nursed him to health, but he still was frail and goofy-looking, with thick glasses and tattered clothes handed down three times. To gauge how different he is from Jimmy, examine the jacket of the 1970 Motown album *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, which the pair recorded as the Ruffin Brothers. By then he was the David Ruffin known far and wide for his Temptations fame, the long, tall, unctuous, bespectacled soulman, the consort of many women. Yet on the album cover next to the taller, more robust Jimmy, he is still the scrawny little brother as they stand side by side in sharp, funky suits, an arm around each other's shoulders. And in contrasting black-and-white snapshots of them as kids, while a round-faced Jimmy smiles smugly in a nice suit, David's eyes bulge like a mosquito's—scarily, he looks just like Diana Ross—and his thick lips and jack-o'-lantern features are tucked under a too-big Little Rascals-style cap.

Brothers being what they are, Davis took unmerciful ragging growing up, not just for being scruffy, but because he seemed dainty, prissy, his skin soft as cotton candy and his features delicate—almost feminine, which did nothing as he matured to ease his anxieties about his sexual identity. He also took heat for, of all things, being too black. Unlike Jimmy, Quincy, and Eli, who were light-skinned, he was dark as pitch. He also had straight black hair, which he would later insist was a skipped-generation trait from his Indian grandfather, Eli's father. The hair, the high cheekbones, the long nose were, he insisted, products of his "Indian blood." Indian or not, it was just more reason for the boys to put him down.

That he could sing, from his earliest days in the crib, was his family salvation, making him useful in Eli's eyes merely as a potential member of a family gospel-singing act he periodically went on the road with, using his boy to back him up. Davis's even then forceful tenor was something special, to be sure, and Eli was proud to include him in various incarnations of the act, under names like the Ruffin Family, the Spiritual Trying Four, and the Spiritual Loving Four. Eli actually got them onto some impressive shows, as the opening acts for a visiting

Mahalia Jackson, the Soul Stirrers, the Five Blind Boys, and the Clara Ward Singers.

However, Eli may well have felt betrayed when Jimmy and Davis in their teen years broke away as a duo, the first life of the Ruffin Brothers, taking gigs around southern Mississippi. If this was a logical extension of their own talents, it may have been the separation from Eli that was the more critical factor. "It was an escape," says Billy Wilson. "They were trying to get away from the old pervert."

When he turned fourteen, craving yet more independence and a greater scope, Davis Ruffin decided to continue his travels alone. It's possible that as the Ruffin brother with the more compelling voice, he may have been recruited by one or more of several gospel groups he sang with during this period, covering his travel and lodging, though he may also have hitchhiked and rode the boxcars, because he would pop up randomly in odd places, some not to sing. For example, he is known to have put in some time in New Orleans as a stable boy, working out horses in the morning before the races. That surely would have been a sight, since by his early teens he'd shot up to six feet tall, meaning he had to tuck his long, spindly legs up to his chin when in the saddle, a place he loved being. He found much about equines that he wished he could appropriate for himself—the immense, muscular power they generated under him that he could amp up with a twist of the reins or a crack of the whip.

His travel routes years later endured mostly as a blur in his memory. Shortly before his death he could only draw a sketchy précis, saying in a radio interview, "I left home at fourteen. I went to Memphis and I was chauffeuring a limo for a minister and then I left Memphis and I went to Arkansas. The minister and I came back and I joined the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Swan Silvertones, and the Soul Stirrers for a short time after Johnny Taylor left. Then I went to Hot Springs, Arkansas. We wasn't selling enough ads for our paper, the minister and I, to afford to keep me on the road. . . . Then I went to Detroit and I met Berry Gordy."

The less abridged version is far more fascinating. Ruffin's spell with the Dixie Nightingales, in their infancy a decade before their most familiar work when recording for Stax Records, included performing on a Saturday morning Memphis radio show at WDIA. In the corridors

Ruffin would mingle with other gospel and jazz units awaiting their time on the air, leading to invitations to jam at the local ballrooms with the Staple Singers and the Swan Silvertones. In the middle of an evolving skillet of gospel-based soul music, he soaked up vocal and stage flourishes. The Staple family act, for instance, featured highly emotional, rejoicing trilling by Mavis Staples set against an acoustic folk-style guitar. The Silvertones, meanwhile, were unique for their three lead singers, blending Claude Jeter's soaring tenor with feverish gospel shouts and a vibrant falsetto.

Ruffin already had begun to broaden his gospel palate, coming to dig the swinging gospel pop of Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson. He would later claim that at a talent show in Memphis he saw a truck driver from Tupelo, Mississippi, named Elvis Presley weld gospel with the nascent rock and roll. On the circuit, Ruffin had also formed a friendship with two young gospel-blues-singing brothers from Cleveland, Bobby and Cecil Womack, both Sam Cooke protégés. One of his Memphis mentors was Phineas Newborn Sr., whose jazz band played at the Flamingo Club on Beale Street. When Newborn took the band across the border to play a gig at the Fifty Grand Ballroom and Casino in Hot Springs, Arkansas, he brought Ruffin along as a background vocalist. Newborn was an innovator; unlike most pianists, he played melodies with both hands rather than maintaining the rhythm chords with the left, making for a freer, improvised feel.

Still just a kid, Ruffin had a real pedigree. He could sing virtually anything, with passion and conviction, and knew what audiences—and especially the women in those audiences—wanted to see. He'd mastered a freewheeling array of moves taken from Jackie Wilson and James Brown—falling to his knees at pleading moments, jackknifing into a full split and back up to punctuate the blissful ones, tossing up the microphone as he swiveled completely around and catching it at the exact moment he faced front again. He might drop down, supine, bent back at the hip, while scudding across the stage, propping and balancing himself only with his free hand under him. Not incidentally, he was a magnet for women, usually much older and both black and white, turned on by his voice and sinewy loins. With no real home, he rarely had trouble finding a bed for the night, and he confidently prowled the cities' red-light districts, finding contentment in the cathouses, no one overly concerned that he was underage.

The most momentous ally he made in Memphis, though, was a murky character who may have been a minster, a con man, a showbiz manager, or all of the above. His name was Eddie Bush, and from bits and pieces spliced together from Ruffin's recollections, it seems that Eddie, and his wife, Dorothy Helen, befriended him and began booking dates for him while he lived in their home and attended high school. In exchange, they took a generous cut of his earnings, meager as those were. David years later described him to Genna Sapia-Ruffin as a country hick, "homely, with missing teeth." Eddie, she wrote, "clung to [David] in hopes of catching the overflow of women," and, somewhat contradictorily, that the Bushes also plied him with women to keep him contented.

By early 1957, when he turned sixteen, he also had a new first name. Possibly urged by Eddie, he changed it to David Ruffin, an identity that became a symbolic closing of the book when midway through the year Jimmy, who'd gone back home to Whynot in the interim, called him with the news that Eli had dropped dead of a heart attack at age forty-eight. For his youngest son, word of his death hit hard. As much as he was entitled to despise the man, there was also requisite guilt that he hadn't made his peace with him—and that, at worst, it was all his fault. In truth, he'd done everything he could to earn the love and respect of a man about whom Earline once said, "Mr. Ruffin didn't love nobody!" And now, before there could ever be a rapprochement, Eli had checked out, leaving him with a jumble of conflicting, unresolved emotions and issues, which would only fester as he got older.

Eli's death led both Jimmy and Eddie Bush to claim they were David's guardian. Earline believed that in Jimmy's case, it was an extension of his childhood influence over his kid brother, factored now by David's superior voice and greater potential to achieve fame. Jimmy, as Earline saw it, "was always jealous of David." In their younger years, she said, Jimmy had "picked on him and fought with him" and "was always mean and bullied him." Now, seeing him rivet audiences, Jimmy "wanted David with him in order to manage his money." So miffed was Earline at Jimmy wanting to move in on David that she insisted he "was the cause of Davis leaving me"—apparently meaning his refusal to move back home to be with her after Eli's demise. Earline also remembered how

David had sent her a few bucks every now and then, with notes that genially instructed her to “Buy yourself some Cokes, Porky Pig,” sharing a private joke between them, but that after he moved to Detroit even that minimal contact ceased. After many years of separation, Earline was reduced to asking Genna, who’d long split from him, “Have you heard from David? I haven’t.”

For this she blamed only one person. “It was Jimmy Lee,” she said, “who put the devilment in him.” However, it wasn’t Jimmy who had first call on him, Rather, Eddie Bush did, explaining why Genna retroactively slams him for “point[ing] David down the road to ruin,” although there’s no earthly reason to believe that Bush did anything other than bring him to Detroit, where Ruffin created his own problems. Indeed, by all accounts, Bush’s tenure with Ruffin was brief and consequential only for the relocation. While Genna wrote obliquely in her memoir that Eddie had “plenty of supplies,” Ruffin did not seem to have turned his attentions to drugs until later, after Bush was out of the frame.

Still, Ruffin was undeniably close with Eddie Bush, who did in fact plan to adopt him, despite the fact that Earline Ruffin was very much alive and was legally his guardian—and clearly was not ever going to renounce that status. Whether or not Eddie actually filed papers, David took to calling him his “stepfather,” solidifying a relationship that Genna looked back on as a scam. “What they were really trying to do,” she said, “was to exploit his talents—some might call it pimping.”

If so, he’d get little in return, though history owes him, big-time, for being either wise or avaricious enough to look around the music map for a potential gold strike in 1957 and determine that it was time to go to Detroit.

Shortly after Ruffin and the Bushes arrived in the Motor City, Eddie was able to fuse into the fabric of the city’s R&B scene and persuade the small Vega label to cut two sides of his protégé. The songs, “You and I” and “Believe Me,” came out as the A- and B-sides of an early 1958 release, under the name of “Little David Bush,” an anomaly that has long flummoxed collectors of Motown arcana. Since almost no copies of the disc survived into the future—not even the catalog number of the record is known—a small urban myth has spread that Ruffin was

not the vocalist. Genna Sapia-Ruffin, one of the few to have heard it, swears that “it was supposed to be David’s voice—it wasn’t,” though no one has ever stepped forward to confirm that or to claim proprietorship. Moreover, the songs have never been included on any Ruffin anthology.

Ruffin for his part never cared to clear up the riddle, or to reminisce much about his early records. All he really said, such as on the live performance DVD *The Original Leads of the Temptations*, released on the Street Gold label three years after Ruffin’s death, was that after touching down in Detroit he began making records that, for him, were “a different kind of music.” Thrown as he was into the R&B/doo-wop pool, the results were likely not to his satisfaction, a verdict that probably applied to what has been reputed to be his next recording for Vega—a single-sided 78 rpm disc from the dinosaur age that, even more ineffably, came out later in 1958 under the name of Eddie Bush. This one was putatively Ruffin, given that he had written the song, a smooth, sexy ballad called “Statue of a Fool,” and rerecorded it for his 1975 album *Who I Am*—something the song seemed to help define, with cathartically biographical passages such as, “On his face, a gold tear should be placed to honor every tear he shed / And I think it would show, and everyone would know, concealed inside is a broken heart.”

More significant than any of these works was that he wiggled his way into Berry Gordy’s small but expanding inner circle. The two met as early as 1957, and Gordy seemed to want to keep him within arm’s length. Soon Ruffin was sort of a pet for the entire Gordy clan. Pops Gordy even let him live in his and his wife’s northern Detroit home, while earning a few dollars working at the family’s print shop. Gwen Gordy took him in as an apprentice at Anna Records, where he sang on sessions and worked in the shipping department packing records into boxes. And he literally helped to build Motown. When Pops Gordy, a contractor by trade, began doing some construction work at 2648 West Grand Boulevard, he gave Ruffin a tool belt and brought him along—meaning that he would one day be singing in a studio into which he’d hammered nails and cemented floorboards. Gwen was plainly the stepping-stone. In 1959, he made his pseudo-Motown entree when Gwen and her partner Billy Davis dropped him into the Voice Masters, though his voice is indistinguishable in the chorus of R&B songs like

“Hope and Pray,” “Oops I’m Sorry,” and the ingenious two-sided versions of “Needed (For Lovers Only).”

It was on the latter, of course, that he first crossed paths with David English, and the soon-to-be Melvin Franklin must have been enthralled with Ruffin, because he would in later years relish telling people some rather remarkable things that he’d never said in real time—such as that Ruffin was in fact his cousin. One of his better riffs appeared in the 1985 book *The Motown Story* by Don Waller. “David Ruffin is my mother’s first cousin,” he began, “making him my second cousin, and he’s also a minister’s son. We use to practice how to preach on the back porch when we were little boys. Now, we did not know that we were cousins when we were growing up. You see, my mother comes from a family of seventeen kids.”

That tale was so off the wall—the two of them actually having come nowhere near each other as kids—that one can appreciate Otis’s eye-rolling reaction when asked about his old friend’s claim. “Listen, I loved Melvin, but Melvin claimed everybody was his cousin at one time or another. He said Richard Street was his cousin. Later on he said Rick James was his cousin. He probably said I was his cousin. When Melvin liked you, he’d want you to be a family member. And he and David hit it off right away. He knew David before he knew the rest of us guys.”

To put the matter to rest, Otis agreed to call Momma Rose, who confirmed his suspicion. “She told me, ‘Otis, you know how Melvin was.’ No, she said he and David were definitely not related.”

Even so, Franklin did have a wealth of plausible memories of the newly arrived Ruffin, recalling that he lived in a dingy hotel room with Eddie Bush in his old neighborhood. When Melvin’s family moved, he kept going to his old school, “a five or six mile walk,” he said. “I’d stop at the hotel [and] David would walk me part of the way.” Ruffin even lent him a white leather coat that Melvin loved—and proceeded to lose when it was stolen out of his school locker. Franklin recalled that the first record he sang on—presumably “Needed”—was cut for some reason in New York, and that Eddie Bush drove them there.

What seemed to strike Melvin, and most people who came across Ruffin back then, was the incredible transformation he would instantly undergo when the lights went up and the microphone was turned on. Billy Davis described a nineteen-year-old Ruffin as “a shy kid willing to do whatever you asked him to.” Soft-spoken and hesitant to initiate

conversation, even a bit scared by the big-city women who came on to him, it was as if giving voice and emotion to a song could release him from having to feel any inner pain or insecurity. He was, Melvin said, “probably the most talented individual of anybody I had met up to [then]. He could turn flips. He was very acrobatic and he could use that stuff emotionally and bring it into play when he was delivering a song.” His favorite word for Ruffin was “phenomenal.”

The Voice Masters, for all their obscurity, were something of a proto-Temptations, as all of the group's many members could take leads. Anna in fact released several of their tracks under the name of the lead singer, such as the singles “Everything About You” and “Every Time” in 1960 as Ty Hunter and the Voice Masters. The same year, Ruffin fronted a gospel-R&B torch song, “I’m in Love,” which so knocked out Gwen that Anna released it under his name, sans the Masters, the first such solo billing he earned. This reward system continued when Gwen, with Billy and her husband Harvey Fuqua, packed in Anna Records to open Check-Mate, where Ruffin had solo billing on two singles cut with the Masters over 1961–62, “Actions Speak Louder Than Words,” a dreamy ballad with stabbing strings and Ruffin emoting like Jackie Wilson in a gospel wail, backed with “You Can Get What I Got,” followed by the up-tempo “Knock You Out (With Love),” with “Mr. Bus Driver (Hurry)” on the flip.

Though distributed by Chess Records, the big Chicago R&B label on which Fuqua had his hits with the Moonglows in the 1950s, these discs were strictly low-priority and not widely circulated. Yet Ruffin had made himself known to all the right people, and his gigs in the local clubs ignited the jolt of electricity that Melvin Franklin kept telling people about. “Oh yeah,” says Otis, “everybody knew who David Ruffin was. Nobody had the word of mouth he had. He was getting raves before we ever did, I’ll tell you that. In fact, he was like us in many ways. People would say, ‘Man, you gotta see this Ruffin cat. There’s nothing he can’t do on a stage,’ but he couldn’t get his break either.”

Neither was Berry Gordy deterred by his skimpy record sales from signing him to the Motown stable after Check-Mate went under in 1962, as he did with Lamont Dozier and three other Voice Masters, including Ty Hunter, who at Motown reformed as the Originals. Along the way, Eddie Bush had, just as had Milton Jenkins, drifted away. Part of it was that Ruffin was making so many contacts on his own that he

no longer needed Eddie to run interference for him. But a bigger factor was that Jimmy Ruffin had followed him to Detroit to make a name for himself. As soon as he got there in 1959, his first order of business was taking David out of Eddie's squalid hotel room and moving with him into a small apartment on West Euclid Street, just a few blocks north of Motown's domicile on West Grand Boulevard—and, as it happened, right across a back alley from Otis and Josephine Williams's apartment on Philadelphia Street. Otis, again smelling fresh blood in the neighborhood, quickly struck up a friendship with the brothers, the three of them often gathering in Otis's kitchen to jam on songs.

If Earline Ruffin is right that Jimmy's neck burned with jealousy about his kid brother hurdling past him on the way up, Detroit couldn't have mellowed him out, as he owed any advancements of his own to David, though these could be called sloppy seconds. Because of David he was signed to Anna Records, but didn't find much work either in the studio or in the clubs and took a job on the assembly line at the Ford Motors plant. Later, when Berry Gordy took in David, he allowed Jimmy to follow him there as a sop to the younger Ruffin. Not that Jimmy seemed overly appreciative; apparently the two lived uneasily with each other, with David having to suck up little digs hurled at him about his looks—for example, Jimmy calling him "Permalube" for the gelatinous pomaded thatch on his head.

The relationship was clearly psychologically torturous for David. No longer the intimidated dormouse from Whynot, when Jimmy would berate him and generally treat him like a kid he would snap and come back at him, verbally dishing out as good as he got, and sometimes, again if Earline can be believed, getting physical, with Genna Sapia-Ruffin writing in her memoir that "[Earline] said that once, when David was living with Jimmy, it got so bad that the police were called." (One should be careful with Earline's recollections, however, which could be just a tad embroidered, such as her insistence that when David was young, Eli and Jimmy "took all his clothes and put him in a big coat and left him in Texas.") Yet David would usually accede to Jimmy, grabbing the thin reed of filial adhesion and loyalty that remained.

Sharing Jimmy's frustration, he agreed that they should run as an entry at Motown, and planned to revive the Ruffin Brothers act, even if Gordy seemed in no great hurry to get them into the studio. But then Jimmy was drafted into the army, a turn of events David took advantage

of to move into the Euclid Avenue flat of his first serious love interest in Detroit, a young singer named Sandra who had recently migrated from Atlanta with her sister Belinda. Soon afterward they married in a perfunctory ceremony at city hall, and Sandra gave birth to a daughter, Cheryl. However, none of this put a dent in his night-crawling habits scrounging the clubs and street corners for fresh meat in a skirt.

His career seemed no more stable. Having taken no strides on his own at Hitsville, he languished on the Motown bench—but with a probing eye on the group that included his “cousin” Melvin Franklin and his neighbor Otis Williams.

Studying the Temptations from ever closer range, Ruffin knew well of the growing schism with Al Bryant. With that as context, his next move can be seen in retrospect as cunningly calculated. When the Temptations played a gig at Chappy’s Lounge in southwest Detroit in October 1963, Ruffin lay in wait until they hit their encore number, “Shout,” which always set off a wild finish. That night it got wilder when Ruffin suddenly bounded from the audience onto the stage, grabbed a microphone, rattled the walls with scorching, soulful yowls, and emptied his entire inventory of feral moves. Executing his 360-degree pivots, microphone-tossing, splits, and cartwheels, he was, Otis says, “like a man possessed.”

Ruffin indeed meshed perfectly as the “sixth Temptation,” and so amped the house that they had to do two more encores to satisfy the begging of the crowd. Even Ruffin was sapped by then, and when they came offstage, all assumed that was it for the night. All except Al, who no doubt realized that Ruffin having horned in like that was no mere exuberant improvisation—it was a planned slap in his face. During the second and third encores, Al had cranked up *his* moves trying to keep pace with David, and he wanted to keep going, to continue what he perceived as a two-man face-off. But David melted back into the crowd and the rest of the guys were headed for their dressing room.

“Man, them people still want us onstage!” Al yelled to them, hanging in the wings.

A dripping Paul, taking the lead, looked over his shoulder as he kept walking and said, “Al, we’ve gone back out three times already. We can’t keep going out and doing the same goddamn thing. We’re done.”

“So let’s do something else,” Al suggested. But they’d already walked away, and Al followed, though not to capitulate. Reaching the

dressings room, he persisted: "Listen, we got to go back and give these people more. Listen to 'em!" Unmoved, Paul ignored him, whereupon Al got what Otis remembers as a "crazy look in his eye." Looking around, he spotted a half-empty beer bottle on a table, grabbed it, and began waving it around menacingly, only to be ignored. It wasn't the first time Al hadn't been taken seriously by the others, but he apparently resolved that it would be the last. As Paul dropped into a chair and started toweling off, Al took a swig of beer from the bottle. Staring at him through bloodshot eyes, he sneered, "Motherfucker, you don't believe I'll hit you with this bottle, do you?"

Paul didn't feel it necessary to say anything and went on swabbing himself. Only Otis kept looking at Al. "I just felt something was coming, something bad," he recalls. "And I caught sight of him raising his arm with the bottle in his hand. I said, 'Uh-oh,' and ran over trying to stop him, but I was a split second late."

Incredibly, like a scene in a cowboy movie, Al brought his arm, and the bottle, down against Paul's head, aiming for his forehead but making contact just over his nose. Completely defenseless, Paul let out a gasp in shock that became a moan as broken glass, beer, and blood flew everywhere. Slumping in the chair, his hands instinctively rose to cover his face, and as blood squirted from between his fingers there was a very real fear in the room that he might have lost one or both of his eyes in the brutal attack.

After an initial hesitation in which everyone stood inert and incredulous—and Al seemingly catatonic, standing fixed, the sheared-off bottleneck still in his hand—Otis and Melvin snapped into action, wrapping towels around Paul's head. Eddie yelled out for someone outside to call an ambulance, saying, "There's been an accident in here!" As Otis remembers the surreal chaos of the moment, all of them, including Al, who while unrepentant obviously regretted what he'd done, rode to Henry Ford Hospital, taking turns cracking jokes to numb Paul's pain.

Most surreal of all was Paul's reaction once he was treated. Spared serious injury by an inch when the bottle just missed his eyes and the glass shards sprayed away from his face, he was stitched up in the emergency room and spent that night in the hospital, coming out with no more than a nasty four-inch gash from the bridge to the tip of his nose. The other Temptations were naturally furious at Al, and after sending him home that night so Paul wouldn't see him, they held an impromptu

group meeting and decided he had to be fired. However, when Otis arrived at Paul's bedside in the morning and related this to him, he was floored by Paul's dissenting vote.

"This will show you what a wonderful guy Paul was. I thought he'd want to kill Al. Because Paul usually didn't take shit from anyone. But he just said, 'No, don't do that, Otis. Let's try and stay together.' Because he knew we were about to make it big and he wanted us all to be there to enjoy it, after all we'd given to it. And he didn't want to mess with the chemistry of the group, either.

"I told him, 'Paul, you got to be kidding. He coulda put your eyes out.' But that's how loyal Paul was. He woulda killed—but only to defend us, the group."

And so Al Bryant caught the break of his life, or so it seemed. Had Paul been so inclined, he could have had Al arrested for assault with a deadly weapon. Under the circumstances, the *least* serious of Al's problems might have been his sacking from the group and being nothing but a milkman. Instead, he was still a Temptation. But anyone who had witnessed David Ruffin onstage with them that night could have read the tea leaves. Certainly, Otis had had an epiphany.

"I saw our future that night," he says. "David made me see it."

As the year moved toward its end, the future he saw was only a few weeks and one more Al Bryant misstep away.

Dream Come True

Whether or not Al knew that Paul saved his bacon, and that the others had heeded Paul's wishes only out of respect for Paul and not any loyalty to Al, he neither expressed contrition nor amended his irritating ways. Still putting away the corn liquor like a fish, still habitually disagreeable, he may have figured he was safe, a nonexpendable cog in the machine. If Al could see that Otis was salivating about David Ruffin coming in, his way of preempting such a move would be to cede not an inch of his territory, having convinced himself that it was he as much as anyone who had sparked all those encores.

He didn't—or refused to—recognize that his petulance would only give Otis the opening to make the move he wanted, and sooner than he could have expected. Merely two months after the incident at Chappy's, Motown held its annual Christmas show at the Fox Theater, an important company event because all the artists would vie for an imaginary ranking as the most popular Motown act based on the fans' level of clamor, thus they would all bust a gut onstage trying to outdo everyone else. The Temptations, though still hitless, reckoned they could waste far more successful acts like the Miracles, the Marvelettes, Marvin Gaye, and Little Stevie Wonder, all of whom could make audiences lose control.

For that reason, the Tempts were especially pumped when they ascended the stage. Paul, his facial wound adding a down-and-dirty “Scarface” look, had crafted some nimble moves for them. Al, though, refused to get in the groove, woofing to Otis, who was closest to him in the group’s conga line. “Otis, we’re the pretty boys. Let them guys do the work. We’ll stay back here and look pretty for the bitches.”

As much as the suggestion might have appealed to him on some level, Otis ignored him as he snaked to the front of the stage with the others. When the show was over and the Temptations had finished nowhere near the winners, Otis was steaming. Not willing to cut Al an inch more slack, he didn’t bother to consult his confreres, all of whom had assured him he could pull the trigger on Al if he got out of line one more time.

“Paul knew the time had come too,” Otis maintains. “He didn’t give Al a free pass forever; it was just to see if Al got his shit together. Even before that show at the Fox, it was obvious Al didn’t learn his lesson: he was making it easy to make the move. That’s why I think Al knew it was coming. He just wanted to go out without, as he saw it, groveling. Because he didn’t give me no argument or anything. Oh, he was hurt, he thought I had it in for him. He was too self-involved to realize he brought it all on himself.”

Ruffin, who got the call the next day that he was in, had reason to admire his handiwork in hastening Al’s exit. But now there was a complication that wound up hurting someone else—his brother Jimmy, who had just returned from his army hitch and wanted Al’s job for himself. Never having accepted that David was the better singer, he believed his vocal jams in Otis’s kitchen had proved it.

“Jimmy was not in David’s league as a singer, but he thought he was in line for the job,” Otis says. “So that was a little delicate situation. I had to let him down easy. I told him, ‘Jimmy, love to have you, but you can’t dance, you got flat feet,’ which was true. And he said, ‘Yeah, Otis, you’re right.’”

Jimmy would have his own version of the selection process, promulgating over the years the myth that he was really the Ruffin the Temptations wanted, saying in a recent interview, “They were begging me to join but I wanted to [be] a solo, so I persuaded my brother David that he should join them instead.” He added that this “decision” was the worst one he’d made in his life. Another myth, from a kooky entry in

the reference book *Contemporary Musicians, Volume Two* had it that “in 1964, the two brothers joined the Temptations, with David Ruffin alternating as the lead vocalist.” The footnote source for this factoid was none other than Jimmy Ruffin. When contacted for this book, he had yet another take on it.

“Otis has lied about my contributions to the group,” he began. “No, I was never in the Temptations. I don’t recall if I was ever asked, but you gotta understand something. I was moving up on my own. Why would I have given up on that to be part of a group? But people don’t know that I had an effect on them by showing them what to do, how to sing, how to look onstage. I made a lot of suggestions that I saw put in place onstage. This was something all of us did at Motown, we all helped each other get ahead, and I happened to have a better sense of stagemanship than they did. What David did with them was part of that; he didn’t learn that shit from them. He learned it from me.”

Otis dispenses with the “other” Ruffin brother with less sensitivity for his feelings now than he did back then. “Believe me,” he says, “Jimmy was *never* considered to be a Temptation.”

And, if truth be told, as much they loved what David Ruffin could do, neither were the Temptations completely sold on him either, based on his possible motivations for wanting in. Even Melvin, his “biggest fan,” was circumspect. “When he asked and begged me to get in the group,” he told Don Waller, “I said, ‘David, uh-uh. You’re a solo guy, you wanna use the group to launch your own career.’ [He said] ‘No, no, no, no, no.’”

Otis, pressing him hard about his commitment, told him, “Listen, David, we’re not fooling around here. You gotta stick with this.” Paul, his nose literally out of joint after months of internal strife, was too tired of it all to make an issue of Ruffin’s motives, wanting just to get him in and up to speed. But Eddie needed to be reassured. Otis insists it wasn’t because of any worries about Ruffin, as an outsider, cutting into his leads—“Nah, we didn’t care about who did how many leads, we could all do leads. I can honestly say none of us ever went to a producer or Berry and said, ‘I want to do more leads.’ Whoever wrote a song for us wrote it for someone to sing lead on, and that was it.” Eddie, he said, was like the others, skittish that David would use the group as a “stepping-stone.”

Still, Eddie had co-opted the Temptations’ “pop idol” role, as opposed to Paul’s sooty soul. Smokey, in fact, had just come in with

a new song contoured to Kendricks's dimpled, heartsick puppy-dog persona. And stirring pubescent female sexual fantasies, after all, was the key to any male group's market potential. So if Eddie was to emerge as the main sound and scent of the group, clearly he had no complaints—even if lurking ahead was David Ruffin, whose whole act was aimed like a heat-seeking missile at the female libido.

The song Smokey wrote for Eddie's adenoidal, adolescent appeal eschewed the notion that the group had to consciously keep its R&B bona fides intact as they kept steadily moving popward. Lurching for a pop song without apology, Smokey wove a lighthearted litany of puckish pickup lines—firstly, “You got a smile so bright, you know you could have been a candle / I'm holding you so tight, you know that you can be a handle,” and getting more impish: “The way you stole my heart, you know you could have been a cool crook / And baby you're so smart, you know that you could be a schoolbook.”

Shortly after the new year, Smokey presented the song, breathily titled “The Way You Do the Things You Do,” the hook line of the lyric, to the group, who didn't know what to make of it. “I told Smokey, ‘What kind of shit is this?’” says Otis with a laugh. “I mean, Smokey had given us these great soulful songs like ‘Slow Down Heart.’ And now we get ‘You got a smile so bright you coulda been a candle’? I said, ‘Smoke, I don't know about this.’ But once we started rehearsing it, it grew on us. We ‘got’ it. The lines were a parody of the things guys say, ‘cause this guy's so taken with this chick he doesn't know what to say. In the end, he chucks the bad lines and just says, ‘You make my life so bright, you make me feel all right.’”

Even if, in hearing the song, the subtlety would be lost in the cornball cleverness, its sharply articulated brass and jazzy piano swirls and Eddie's fetching, breezy midrange falsetto demanded attention. Or, as it dawned on Otis, “Maybe we didn't need a great soulful song. Maybe we just needed a good song that makes you smile when you hear it.”

There was a reason for the better clarity of the arrangement. “The Way You Do” was recorded at a time when the recording process at Motown had become more sophisticated. Using a four-track machine now, allowing for greater separation of instruments, producers could

actualize specific sounds they wanted, with more detail and nuance. All around the industry, the new standard was the cutting of the instrumental tracks before the vocal track was added later. For the Temptations, as for many, it was a whole new way of singing, with only headphones and not a live band pumping the rhythm into their heads, yet demanding the same degree of emotional involvement.

The vocal track for "The Way You Do" was cut on January 9, a day after Smokey had cut the rhythm track, which with its stopped musical images retained the old-time jam-session feel thanks to the peerless alchemy of the Funk Brothers and the dungeonlike acoustics of Studio A.

Indeed, with James Jamerson's bass and the guitars all plugged into one amp, the rhythm was still a five-fingered fist, and Smokey would let it pump until he got what he wanted, those little rough edges of a live sweatfest. That no doubt made the transition to the modern age of recording easier for artists like the Temptations. Even so, Stevenson thought that the isolation of their own instruments—their voices—prompted some subtle nuances from them as well. "I can listen to 'The Way You Do the Things You Do' and I hear exactly when Melvin or Paul, any of 'em, would bend or soften a note, take it off the melody line—or sing nothing. One of the hardest lessons for a singer or a musician to learn is that sometimes it's not what you sing or play, it's what you *don't*. Sometimes you let an echo finish it out for you. The Funk Brothers understood that better than anybody, and the Tempts fell right into it."

For all of the above, Gordy was certain he had a winner and that the public's ability to get a tactile feeling for the Temptations would now take a quantum leap. He rushed it out as a single, backed by "Just Let Me Know," a middling ballad with Paul on lead, on January 23, with the full support of the Motown marketing machine. But through no fault of his or anyone or anything else, the timing of this release—as with every other release of an American-made record to go into the market at this time—was suddenly problematic, facing an uncertain fate as a sense of unease bled from East Coast to West.

That agita, of course, was caused by four funny-looking, mop-topped British lads who were moving the pop culture axis, at great peril to the established American music power brokers.

That January, the momentum and hype was mounting to unbearable levels as the Beatles moved toward their hysteria-bathed American debut on the February 9 *Ed Sullivan Show*. Far from being an anticlimax, the show detonated Beatlemania and the British “invasion” of the American musical landscape, rendering almost immediately passé the gatekeepers of the pop/rock arterial system—most of whom occupied office space along a five-block tract of Broadway, its metaphorical landmark being the Brill Building.

It had been only five years since that inner sanctum of song publishers congealed with Don Kirshner as its merry Falstaff, a king grown fat with the best songwriters in the business and smugly confident that producers and record honchos had to come to him for hit material, and pay for it with shared royalties. However, the Brill men’s power could only ebb, Beatles or not. Berry Gordy was proof of that. Though Gordy had modeled his power lineament after Kirshner’s, his aim was to cut out the white brokers from the profits of black artists, producers, and, naturally, the prime black label owner (though this did not stop him from installing white businessmen into the Motown hierarchy). In so doing, and by operating independently—and successfully, earning \$4.5 million in profits in 1963—Motown had actually helped to weaken the Brill grip by the time the Fab Four cut it to the knees.

In this light, the February 1 edition of *Billboard* has a read-it-and-weep quality when put into historical context. On the Hot 100 chart, the first two slots were held by “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “She Loves You”; at a fading three and four were the Four Seasons’ “Rag Doll” and Lesley Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me,” both of which came from the Brill pool. And this was just the augury of things to come. On April 4, the Beatles had the top five singles, and a week later a record-to-this-day fourteen singles on the Hot 100 and the top two positions on the album chart, *Meet the Beatles* and *Introducing the Beatles*.

Sounding an alarm, or just a fine whine, were two articles in the February 8 issue from the American industry’s point of view. Bearing the headlines “Beatles Gross 17 Mill Plus in Six Weeks” and “Beatles Bug As They Control Air,” the texts contained much hand-wringing, such as that of disgruntled “[American] disc men” who were “complaining that they [are] having a tougher time . . . getting radio air time for new releases.”

In the same issue, however, nearly lost on the “Breakout Singles” page, for records not yet on the chart but getting strong sales in major markets, under “Regional Breakouts” appeared “The Way You Do the Things You Do, Temptations, Gordy 7028 (Jobete; BMI (Detroit)).” That was a small hint that, having inoculated himself as an industry outlier, Gordy would provide tutelage about how to compete against skinny British singers who wrote and played their own songs—using the elements of R&B that had so inspired the Brit groups, adapted to pop sensibilities.

“The Way You Do” kept squirming up the chart until it stopped at No. 12 the week of April 4. The Temptations, however, didn’t know of the song’s flight. “We were a working group, man,” Otis says, “so we left right after we recorded it to do three weeks up in Muskegon, Michigan, at the state fair. And when we came back, David and I went over to Motown and suddenly people were making a fuss over us about us having a hit. We said, ‘We do?’ and [they] showed us the trade papers, where the song was racing up the charts with a bullet and all. And David and myself, we were just overwhelmed. We fell into a chaise longue and started crying like babies. I remember I put my arm around David and he was shaking in happiness. He said, ‘Otis, this is the first time in my life I feel like I’ve been accepted, that I’ve done something.’”

Until “The Way You Do the Things You Do” was a certifiable hit, Motown still had the Temptations on the back burner. As late as the early spring of 1964, they were singing backup for an obscure Motown singer, Liz Lands, whom Gordy signed after she had performed at Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington, appearing on the records Gordy released of the “I have a dream” speech. A single, “Midnight Johnny,” backed with “Keep Me,” was released as Liz Lands and the Temptations. After “The Way You Do,” the mop-up days were over. Otis contends, however, that they and Motown were shortchanged on the success of the song. “Looking back, if you ask me, that record did a lot better than it was given credit for. We saw the reports that it was being played everywhere, in Chicago, Cleveland, Philly. The DJs were playing it back to back—they’d say, ‘That song was so nice, we gotta play it twice.’ They were just wearing it out. Stores were sold out of it.

Sometimes, records that didn't sell anywhere near that got to number one, with the right shenanigans."

In theory—the only way this argument can be carried on given how Gordy hid his books—if Motown had "shmeared" some of the right people getting the record its buzz, it was still learning the rules of the game; and during the learning process, No. 1 hits were still a hard commodity to come by. "I don't know how many records were sold, only Motown did," concludes Otis. "But I have the gut feeling our record sold enough to be a number one."

Seeing its sales flourish, Gordy gave the go-ahead for a debut Temptations album, having waited until they'd finally rung up a pop hit that could drive sales—something that was especially critical at a time when the R&B market was more and more overlapping with the pop market. That trend had led *Billboard* to discontinue its R&B chart in November 1963, deeming a "race music" chart to be déclassé as it suffused into the general terrain, in no small part due to Motown. (The lesser-regarded *Cashbox* retained its R&B chart, with "The Way You Do" going to No. 1 that month.) This embargo lasted only until a new awareness of black music had sprouted in reaction to the increasing homogenization of the Brit Invasion's idioms—again, in no small part due to Motown—whereupon *Billboard* reinstated the chart on January 23, 1965.

The LP, with the de rigueur title *Meet the Temptations*, hardly seemed to merit any attention. Typical of most pop/rock albums of the day, the bulk of its material was old, failed singles and their B-sides. And yet it benefited by Motown's carefully laid groundwork for a Temptations' "breakout" a full three years after they had come aboard. One of the prongs was a full-page ad in the April 18 *Billboard*, in which "HITSVILLE" was splashed across the top and spotlights dotted the page with the titles of hot current Motown songs—the first being "The Way You Do the Things You Do," above Marvin Gaye's "You're a Wonderful One," Mary Wells's No. 1-headed "My Guy," and two others by the Contours and Martha and the Vandellas.

Buying such ads may have been one of those intra-industry "shenanigans" Gordy was learning about, a charade of mutual back-scratching, with expensive ad buys in the trade papers possibly the price to pay for some priceless "help" for a record. In this case, for example, that same issue rather remarkably chose *Meet the Temptations* for the back-page

"Album Reviews" space—the sort of exposure that could determine whether distributors would take on and record store owners would stock a new release. Under "Pop Spotlights" was the normal seriocomic *Billboard* "review," which was always a rave and generally interchangeable with any other review, with only the names needing to be changed. It read, "Here's a young group that's hot and there's no reason in the world why this LP shouldn't score. They've got some other good sides besides the hit [with] the best track [being] 'Paradise.'"

The album, though, was a reach too far, going no higher than No. 95. But it did help break out the Temptations as avatars of Motown's "second wave" sent into battle against the English rockers and the spin-off American bands that played their own instruments and wrote their own songs. Implicit now was that they *had* to deliver a bigger hit or risk losing that status.

The problem for most of 1964 was that no one at Motown seemed to know any more what they had in David Ruffin now than they had in 1962, which was no less than an explosive alloy of all the different shadings Gordy wanted to hear in the Temptations' records. Out on the road, the group, knowing exactly what it had, eagerly sent Ruffin out front on many of the songs that they hadn't recorded, such as "Under the Boardwalk" and the showstopper "Shout." Some of those early Ruffin performances—which made it seem like they meant *him* when they sang "The Way You Do the Things You Do"—featured moves that Otis says "I didn't think any human being could do. I still don't know how he tossed the microphone up, do a three-sixty, fall to his knees, rise up, and without looking reach in the air and catch it as it came down. The man didn't *seem* human."

They had also fused into a symmetrical configuration onstage based on their heights and personae. Most nights, Melvin, a bit stubby and the weakest dancer, was at the far left. Either Eddie or David, both the skinniest and longest-limbed ones, was next in line when the other was singing lead. Then came Otis, the least heard but best-looking and center of gravity. Then Paul, who used the space between himself and the lead singer—if it wasn't him, at which times David or Eddie would take his place—to uncork his instinctive array of moves that would transport him diagonally across the stage during the break

of a song, leading the familiar “conga line” before arriving back in his slot just as the final verse came around. If David was on lead, he would generally riff moves on his own. If it was Eddie, he’d join in on the line.

It ran smooth as a Timex—or more aptly, an Elgin. But while ITMI was consistently booking them on the road, back at Motown the supercharged appeal of Ruffin didn’t seem to carry over. For “The Way You Do,” Smokey so recessed him into the background choir that, as distinct as his voice was, even a critical listening of the song cannot find a trace of it. The success of the record mandated no cause for change. And Smokey made none for the follow-up, “I’ll Be in Trouble.” Recorded in early March with the vocals cut three weeks later, it was a shameless and wan copy, right down to the drawn out “Wellll” cueing the title hook, and by the time it peaked on the chart at No. 33 in early June, many DJs had flipped it over to play the more infectious grooves of “The Girl’s Alright with Me”—an up-tempo song written by Eddie and padded by Eddie Holland and Norman Whitfield—sending it to No. 102 a month later, a rare chart double dip that earned Holland and Whitfield a shot at the next Temptations single.

This was “Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me So Blue),” a bouncy, big band number suggestive of Martha and the Vandellas’ “Heat Wave,” one of Eddie Holland’s first huge hits writing in conjunction with his brother Brian and Lamont Dozier, who’d all found their niches in composing, and the latter two producing, songs instead of singing them. “Girl” was, like “Trouble,” perfectly satisfying pop-soul, both with Eddie on lead. Only now it seemed his comely pop idol image just may have been overplayed, uninterrupted as it was for three straight singles, four with the double-sided hit. That’s when Smokey decided to appraise them when they were on their own, in a live venue. That was a Twenty Grand Club gig that late summer at which Ruffin’s sandpapery tenor on “Shout” sent Smokey running backstage.

“I got a song for you,” he told David after the show.

It was one that would make history tremble; at the time it had been written by Smokey and Ronnie White for the Miracles, “My Girl” was an answer song to “My Guy,” intended to milk more of that cash cow. But after Ruffin’s voice convinced Smokey the song’s true colors would be better revealed by a gritty lead vocal, Smokey and White cut a demo rhythm track on September 25 in a slower, more emotionally gushy

style. Then, during a November respite when both they and the Miracles were on the bill at the Apollo Theater, between shows Smokey and White summoned the Tempts into their dressing room. Smokey, wearing a bathrobe, switched on a portable tape player and had the Tempts sing their prescribed harmony parts to the demo track. While the group dug the verses, the tape seemed not overly compelling. As Otis recalls, "It was just another song to us." Even after Smokey went in to cut the rhythm track with the Funk Brothers, Otis heard it as mundane. "Nothing special. Maybe 'cause it was just a basic rhythm track. It was so, y'know, nekkid, unadorned. I didn't see what was special about it."

What he didn't hear Smokey did; and what Smokey heard, the instinctual genius of men like Earl Van Dyke, Robert White, Eddie Willis, Joe Messina, Benny Benjamin, and of course James Jamerson actualized. It was Jamerson's sunburst Fender Precision electric bass that had the first say on "My Girl," a slightly fuzzy, languid triplet—one high note on the D string, two lows on the A string—that sounded like a heartbeat in a stethoscope: once, twice, three, then a fourth time before there was any other sound. Then came a five-note scale played by White on his oversized Gibson L-5 electric guitar, up and down the scale with mesmerizing repetition throughout the entire song, its clarity and roundness of tone carved not by a pick but by the long, uncut, witchlike nail on his index finger. Next were the deliberate strokes of Benjamin's thick sticks clocking an eighth-note beat against his Slingerland snare drum, matched beat for beat by the sharp *chink* of Messina's fat-string Fender Telecaster. The overall chord arrangement was simple—beginning in the proverbial "bouncy C" designed to allow Ruffin to cruise through the lyric without strain, then springing up to a more challenging D on the final verse, requiring him to reach higher, with more emotional heat.

Ruffin would make it all work a week later when the vocal session went down. Negotiating every turn of the lyrics with pitch-perfect power and fine shading, he constructed a near neurotic subtext of separation anxiety and fantasy, turning the seemingly chipper caroling of "I've got sunshine on a cloudy day" and "When it's cold outside I've got the month of May" into the arid gold dust of unfulfilled fantasy. Ruffin later related that he didn't sing the song as though to a woman but rather by imagining he had a young daughter he was being kept from—as opposed to his actual daughters, whom he kept himself

away from. That was, he noted, the only way he could creep up on the vulnerability and tenderness he refused to allow himself to feel for any woman. His imploring recitation of the title phrase, echoed each time with equal intensity a shade apart by Paul, was an emotional combination punch to the gut.

The beyond-perfect results sent Smokey back into the studio to saturate the rhythm and vocal tracks with Paul Riser's sheen of strings and horns. Still, the defining visceral kick of "My Girl" would be Ruffin's vocal and James Jamerson's continual heartbeat bass line, one that could almost be taken as the protagonist's own cleaved heart. As with most Jamerson bass lines, it could not have been prefigured in the chord charts. "That was classic Jamerson," says Cornelius Grant, who after "The Way You Do the Things You Do" began to travel with the Temptations as their guitarist and musical director and would contribute to nearly all their studio sessions. "He felt it, so he played it. That 'DOO do-do, DOO do-do, DOO do-do'. . . it might have been intended for the break but Smokey heard it and said, 'Let's move that sucker up to the front.'"

That kind of small spontaneous alteration shaped music history, only the most familiar—and probably the simplest—of a thousand such Jamerson riffs. In the wide lens of history, Jamerson, as the single most indispensable human at Motown next to Berry Gordy, made the Motown "sound." In a narrower lens, on that November day in 1964 he made the Temptations.

When Otis was played the final version of "My Girl," "I was knocked on my ass," he says. "The strings, the horns, the dreamlike quality of it. It just had a whole 'nother daylight to it." Seeing Smokey, he told him, "Smoke, I don't know how big a record this thing's gonna be—but it's gonna be *big*." Smokey played it cool. "Hope so," was all he said, which Otis took as an admission. "It was like he was saying, 'I don't know what else I can possibly do for you guys.'"

As it turned out, there *was* nothing he could do better for them. Which was why something big indeed was about to happen. Something *dangerous*. Released four days before Christmas backed with "(Talking 'Bout) Nobody but My Baby," a nearly year-old Eddie Holland–Norman Whitfield song produced by the latter, "My Girl" took a breakneck ride

up the charts. Needing no *Billboard* blandishments to ease its path, its instantly unforgettable groove was heard everywhere, and often, within weeks. Lavalike, it melted the charts down to size, careening from No. 76 in mid-January to 41 a week later, then, in succession, 12, 8, 5, 4, 3—and finally, inevitably, No. 1 the week of March 6, displacing Gary Lewis and the Playboys' "This Diamond Ring" and ahead of epochal markers such as the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," the Kingsmen's "The Jolly Green Giant," and the Beatles' "Eight Days a Week." It spent a week in the penthouse—Motown's fifth act after the Marvelettes, Little Stevie Wonder, Mary Wells (with the progenitor "My Guy"), and the Supremes to go No. 1 pop, before being evicted by "Eight Days a Week." In toto, "My Girl" remained on the chart for eleven weeks. It was also No. 1 on the reactivated R&B chart for six weeks. For Gordy, clearly, the song had reaped the best of all possible worlds.

Anticipating a commotion of this sort, Smokey turned without pause to a follow-up, cutting the rhythm track for it a week before "My Girl" was even on the market, with the group laying down the vocal in mid-January. The song, "It's Growing," cowritten by Miracle Warren Moore, was to Smokey's credit no facile copy of "My Girl." Rather, its hushed but determined pleading and building orchestration, literally following the instruction of the title, closely tracked the Impressions' "message" soul in songs like "It's All Right" and "People Get Ready."

This, of course, was similar to the gospel music that Ruffin had cut his teeth on, and his lead vocal was another precious gem, less serrated and more buttery than on "My Girl," but pockmarked with the same trembling, straining moments of heartache. Sounding almost childlike, he enters after a piano intro and dramatic drum roll, purring, "Like a snowball rolling down the side of a snow-covered hill, it's growing / Like the size of the fish that the man claims broke his reel, it's growing."

These were strong words for the subconscious during the pivotal and still violent days of the civil rights struggle, which enjoyed a signal victory with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later. Indeed, but for a few allusions to boy-and-girl matters, the lyrics seem to hint at a deeper societal tug, such as "Every day it grows a little more than it was the day before." Accordingly, "It's Growing" may fairly be judged as an important

benchmark at Motown, where such “deep” songs about the civil rights cause were all but avoided. Smokey again overdubbed strings and flavored the Temptations’ background choir with a female trio they knew from the pythonic Johnnie Mae Matthews sessions, the Andantes, who were now Motown’s premier house backup singers, drizzled over many acts’ records, most notably those of the Four Tops. But “It’s Growing” was all David Ruffin, again. Released on March 18 just weeks after “My Girl” hit the top, with “What Love Has Joined Together” on the back, it nestled comfortably into No. 18 (and No. 3 R&B). While not a spectacular showing, it was supplemental proof that the Temptations had become a mainstay, with nothing predictable about their songs except that, whatever they had, it needed to be heard, and then heard again.

8

Don't Look Back

My Girl" circumnavigated the decline of the old order of American pop music, the last hallelujah of which might well be seen in retrospect in the composite pop chart for 1964. Almost comically now, but nothing particularly eyebrow-raising then, the No. 1 song that year, ahead of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "She Loves You," was Louis Armstrong's "Hello Dolly." Other high-charting entries included Dean Martin's "Everybody Loves Somebody," Al Hirt's "Java," Barbra Streisand's "People," and Lorne (*Bonanza*) Greene's "Ringo." For several more years there would be vestigial leftovers of the order—Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Andy Williams, and Perry Como would land on the pop chart as late as Richard Nixon's second term—but in the main the traditional metric of pop music, and the original one of rock and roll music, was over. This, of course, was the vocal group (as opposed to the vocal group that played its own instruments and wrote its own songs), a demise that seemed to sound a death knell for both the boy and the girl group idioms.

Except that out in Motown, the tides had been so diverted from 2648 West Grand Boulevard that it was a girl group who was actually challenging the Beatles' hegemony. While most American record companies were foraging garages for self-contained bands, at Hitsville the

Supremes had in the late summer of 1964 finally broken out of their ring of failure with the fetching Holland-Dozier-Holland entreaty of love's yearning and burning, "Where Did Our Love Go," sparking a streak of five consecutive No. 1 hits—the ensuing ones being "Baby Love," "Come See About Me," "Stop! In the Name of Love," and "Back in My Arms Again" in the same light-soul/light-pop vein. Only Elvis had managed that feat, but now the Beatles and the Supremes would do it, the Fab Four twice, once with six in a row.

By mid-1965, the Supremes had vaulted to the head of the Motown class, where they were ensured to stay once Gordy, now divorced and rid of Raynoma Liles, began a tempestuous sexual liaison with Diane Ross—who, buffed for a more upscale audience, was rebranded Diana Ross. Almost immediately, once the Supremes—"Berry's girls," in the paternal vernacular adopted by the Motown bosses—appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on December 25, 1964, their success in climbing through the portals of the bourgeois elite was the end of Motown as its own denizens knew it. While the Supremes would record songs friendly to biracial record buyers, the objective for them, and subsequently all the top acts, would be the very white Formica of high-toned supper clubs like the Copacabana and hotel/casinos in Las Vegas. "Crossover" was no longer the paradigm; it was now "changeover."

Toward that end, Gordy would hire choreographers, etiquette coaches, fashion consultants, and Broadway musical conductors, all to polish and varnish the Supremes' rather tedious stage act. Other Motown performers were told to attend classes in poise, grammar, diction, and overall how to carry oneself in a white world, a charade that the Supremes' Mary Wilson recalled as an "insult" to the group, who she said were hardly ghetto trash but three young women who were quite refined, thank you, as it was. As for the Temptations, being away from home so much in this case had its rewards.

"When they told us what the hell was going on back at Motown," Otis says with a grin, "we didn't ever want to go home. Being out on the road gave us an excuse not to sit in a classroom and be told how to act white. In our case, what we did was totally different from the Supremes. People in our audiences wanted us to look and act like what we were, not what we weren't."

However, in time, even they would be indoctrinated to fall in line with the "new" Motown. But for now and the foreseeable future,

Gordy's gaze was fixed on Ross. Secretly, but easily assumed, not least of all by Mary Wilson and the increasingly rebellious Flo Ballard, was the eventual payoff: breaking Diana Ross out of the group setting and making her an ultra diva.

Gordy's obsessions with Ross and the Supremes made him a fortune—Motown's sales hit a robust \$40 million in 1965, with fully one-fifth of the year's twenty-five records to go to No. 1, three by the Supremes and one each by the Temptations and the Four Tops. But little time was left for other Motown acts to flourish. Many early Hitsville artists were let go, others atrophied by neglect, causing much resentment among the lesser bestowed. Still, moving mostly outside this knot of intracompany politics and favoritism, and pretty much under the radar screen, the Temptations established their own sine qua non, all the more impressively because Gordy seemed not to exert much effort to move them onward and upward. For that Otis can be proud, for no greater reason than, as he duly notes, needing only a rimshot, "None of us had to ball Berry to get ahead." That seemed plenty good enough, at least for now.

For Gordy it was too, since the Temptations kept Motown rooted to the R&B charts, even with Gordy's ongoing homogenization program in effect. No matter if a new release was shamelessly pop, their inner-city cachet seemed enough to reserve the top spot on the R&B chart. That was of enormous value to Gordy in keeping his soul bona fides intact, and to the other acts as well, and not just those that depended on black sales to survive. It was satisfying indeed that the Supremes were nominated for the Best R&B Recording Grammy in 1964 for the off-white "Baby Love," and that "My Girl" and Junior Walker and the All Stars' splendid "Shotgun" were so nominated the following year. (Obviously, it would have been too daring for the Grammy panjandruns if any of these now-timeless records were nominated for Best Single.) Even a naked play for white buyers like *The Supremes at the Copa* made it onto the R&B album chart in 1965, when a *Billboard* readers' poll named the Temptations the best R&B group and the Supremes as runner-up.

In the confusion of crossover-lapping, Gordy could reliably count on the random placement of the "darker" groups in the pop grab bag. Temptations records were often reviewed on the "Pop Spotlights" page, which admittedly wasn't as weird as, say, the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" making the R&B chart. If Gordy's bread and butter was his most

whitebread act, the case could surely be made that the Temptations were what remained of Motown's original mission, and its conscience. And what remained was vital at a time when Motown had nearly abandoned its birthright.

In that transitional buffer between Apollo and Copacabana sensibilities, the Temptations made it onto the bus as a featured act for the soon-to-be discontinued Motortown Revue. But while 1965 was a transitional fold as well for racial positivism—the Voting Rights Act being passed and signed by President Lyndon Johnson late that summer—little tangible had changed in the American South that had bred all five Temptations. When the Revue came through early in the year, there were still partitions between races at integrated concerts. Otis, who'd never before seen that, having often played for biracial houses in the inner-city black-and-tan clubs, was even more unsettled when during one show in Boone, North Carolina, there was a ruckus in the hall.

"We were onstage and some rednecks jumped up in the crowd and were ranting and raving about niggers this and niggers that. I mean, how crazy was it that you'd go to a Motown show and yell racist shit?"

"But then we got back to the hotel—the Daniel Boone Hotel—we were packing our things into the bus and these guys—they may have been the same guys, for all anyone knew—came down in an old car and a guy leaned out the passenger window and took a shot with a shotgun into the whole crowd of us.

"And it was like chaos; everybody was ducking or running and people are screaming, and I looked up and David had a tire iron in his hand and he's running down the road in the dark after the car! Melvin and I took off after him to drag his ass back. We said, 'David, are you fucking outta your mind? They got a gun!'

"Luckily, no one was hurt and we took it in stride—some of the others apparently had been through the same kind of thing on previous tours. And that was the last time we ever had a problem like that." He laughs. "I mean, we had *other* problems, like with women's husbands and boyfriends, but not with rednecks. It was like a last shot of the old guard. It wasn't that racism ended, but you could feel the winds changing out there. And not to sound pompous, but I think the Temptations helped that along a little bit."

Otis's postulation is a trenchant one. That is, the Temptations' weaving of still resonantly black music into the mainstream was actually more instrumental to the wave of black inclusion than the Supremes' forsaking of it in their music, and more so the latter's white-glove stage act. There are, to be sure, tentacles of this debate that need to be considered. For one, the Supremes were a product and proxy not just of Gordy's cross-over visions but of their affixed songwriting-producing team, Holland-Dozier-Holland (HDH). Eddie Holland has no compunction admitting that "we didn't write black music—we wrote *hits*." Not that Motown's other writers didn't, but the meter and cadences of HDH songs were contoured implicitly for white ears and notions of rhythm.

Mickey Stevenson, who of course had wanted that intrinsic formula from the start, claims he never even checked to see if Motown records were on the R&B charts. "Look, what we wanted was for stations—no matter what kind of stations—to play the records. That's the difference between an R&B song and a pop song. Everyone likes the pop song. The black audience was small, the black teenagers were growing up and becoming pop audiences. The R&B song could maybe take you to the Top 10. The pop song took you to No. 1. 'My Girl' did that."

That song aside, the Tempts by default were messengers of Smokey Robinson, who for all his pop ditties never lost his early R&B groove, with Miracles mid-sixties classics like "Ooh Baby Baby" and "The Tracks of My Tears" dripping with some of the heaviest soul syrup in the Motown catalog (but which, bearing out Stevenson's hypothesis, didn't make it to No. 1 on the pop chart). Moreover, for the Tempts, Robinson wrote as if he had some sort of karmic compact to keep it real. He could do that with Ruffin as his syrup dispenser.

In 1965, Robinson's R&B pedigree was all over the Temptations. In March came their second album, an undisguised paean to their maestro called *The Temptations Sing Smokey*. Culling their own hits ("The Way You Do the Things You Do"—reprised from *Meet the Temptations*—"My Girl," and "It's Growing"), with B-sides and covers like the Miracles' "You've Really Got a Hold on Me," "Who's Lovin' You," and Mary Wells's "You Beat Me to the Punch," the LP went no higher than No. 35 on the pop chart (almost comically, *Billboard's* rave review of it misidentified "their No. 1 single 'My Love'"). But it debuted at No. 6 on the R&B chart, hitting No. 1 in April and staying there for fourteen weeks. Moved out by a Four Tops album, it then went back to

No. 1 in August, where it remained for five more weeks—and on the R&B chart for over half a year.

By then, as well, they had put another hit on the singles chart in “Since I Lost My Baby,” a sensuous ballad Smokey cowrote with Warren Moore and produced over three sessions in early and mid-May. With its “Tracks of My Tears” groove, the tune was gorgeous from the lush string and piano intro and first notes of Ruffin’s fragile vocal, its “My Girl”-like plaint that only with “my baby” was there sun and light, and without it “the sun is cold and the new day seems old.” Borrowing from the socially aware ’hood wish list of “It’s Growing,” another product of this love was that it brought “plenty of work and the bosses are paying.” All through, the almost childlike vocal meshed with an especially tight background choir in which Otis’s anchoring tenor rang as clear as a bell.

Released on June 1 with Smokey’s “You’ve Got to Earn It” on the reverse, by mid-July it had made the *Billboard* “Pop Spotlights” page, raved up as a “smooth rhythm ballad” with a “fine vocal performance”—the “rhythm” part being a given in Temptations reviews. By summer’s end, it had peaked at No. 17 pop, No. 4 R&B, with the flip breaking away and making it to, respectively, No. 123 and No. 22 as well.

That the Temptations seemed to exist in a separate sphere within the Motown crowd could be gleaned by midyear. In March, Gordy flew the Motortown Revue across the pond, striking a blow for American music in the British homeland. It was a bold move, playing off Motown’s recent forays onto the UK charts and the fact that the big Brit bands had been heavily influenced by American soul music, perhaps Motown most of all. But unlike the tour’s headliners, the Supremes, and the now lesser Smokey and the Miracles, Martha and the Vandellas, and Stevie Wonder, the Temptations would only be short-term riders on the four-week jaunt, having been invited to appear late in the month in Bermuda for a weeklong engagement at the island country’s biggest hotel, the Forty Thieves. Gordy, perceiving the gig as a must to keep their star rising, booked it.

They did appear on a March 18 BBC TV show, *The Sound of Motown*, an hourlong special produced by the weekly program *Ready Steady Go!* and hosted by the British diva and Motown acolyte Dusty

Springfield. Following the Supremes' rendition of "Stop! In the Name of Love" with an abbreviated version of "My Girl," the Tempts later sang "The Way You Do the Things You Do" during a collective handoff jam session. They were in fact critical to the impression left by the aggrandized Supremes. Needing a choreographic gimmick for "Stop!" Diana Ross had pleaded with the Tempts before the show to come up with something. Paul, watching the girls rehearse the song, busted a move on the lyrical hook, like a traffic cop, jutting out his right hand, palm facing forward, left hand saucily on his hip, then letting his hand drift down, finger snapping on the way. *That* little riff would come to be no less than the Supremes' defining image.

Splitting a week later for Bermuda, they were treated as royalty when they arrived there. Put up in a government-owned villa, in "a big house up on a hill," as Otis recalls, the house became Debauchery Central, as island women would follow them back there after their shows and camp on the hill until summoned inside, one by one, two by two, and so on, for merrymaking.

"Being young and wild," Otis wrote in *Temptations*, "we'd party until 5 or 6 in the morning. The neighbors complained to the police and yelled out their windows at us, but we didn't care. It was just too damned good."

Until, in the usual random fashion, another of the group's habitual dustups broke out, this one between Eddie and David. They had taken to sharing a room as a kind of lead-singer alliance—not incidentally, Eddie could no longer stand Paul, who now roomed alone—that they believed was necessary in light of the Otis-Melvin axis. Not that any short-term alliance could ever quell the regular nuclear explosions within the group that would grow out of picayune arguments. And if David's reaction to being asked to join the group was to show that, as he would sing in a later song, "I don't mind weeping," being in and being the man turned him considerably less obsequious.

"It was unbelievable the change that took place with David," says Don Foster, then the group's road manager. "I think it was mainly because he started listening to people, so-called friends who kept kissing his ass, telling him he was it, he was bad, he was the Temptations. They used to travel with him. They'd call him 'Poppa'—they'd say, 'Man, Poppa, you was *bad* tonight!' They were leeching off him but it was like a salve for him. He needed it. And he started to believe it."

Even then, in 1965, Foster opined, it was an easy assumption to make that David Ruffin was going to be trouble. Already, in violation of Motown's authority in such matters, he had hired his own personal manager, "a guy named Royce, that was his last name and all anyone called him," Foster recalls, though actually his full name was Royce Moore. "He also had a private bodyguard that went around with him, Ronnie Jackson, a black belt karate guy that scared the shit out of everyone."

Adds Foster, "At that point, drugs weren't a part of it. It was just ego. And look, David wasn't the only guy in the group who could get a little nuts. Those guys fought all the time. The first time I saw that happen, Paul and Eddie were going at it. And they told me, 'Stay out if it.' 'Cause it was between them. They were homeboys, they grew up together, they had a long history, and so you just let them alone when they got into it.

"But with David, it was different. He didn't think of them as family. It wasn't all for one; it was all for David. He saw them as his backup group. He hated to sing backup on a song when Eddie was on lead. And he'd say so. He'd get into situations where they'd have to restrain him before he got physical with one of 'em.

"Listen, with all the hits they were having, they never would have lasted more than a few years with David. That's just the fact. They never would have made it that long."

Ruffin clearly needed to be restrained in Bermuda when the argument with Eddie escalated, leading both of these tall, spindly men to assume fighting stances, fists clenched. After preliminarily woofing threats, they began wrestling each other to the floor of the room. The melee spilled out into the hallway, where the crashing and screaming awoke Otis and Melvin in their room down the hall, sending them running in their skivvies to break up the latest Temptations tussle. Otis got there in time to see the tipping point, when he said, "Eddie slapped David upside the head and sent his glasses flying, and then they started in on each other."

The brawl in the hall wasn't subdued until expensive furniture was overturned, leaving holes in some of the walls. For this Who-like trashing, the government, Otis says with a sheepish grin, "banned us from ever coming back to the country."

Gordy, who was known to blow his stack at even minor disturbances caused by his artists and who preached tired lectures about

how they were to comport themselves (never mind his own gambling and philandering habits), skipped the usual formalities this time and let them off with a limp warning about repeating such future conduct. At that juncture, it was far more important for him to smooth things over with the Bermudans in order to ensure that other acts (read: the Supremes) would still be welcome there. Evidently, in the locus the Temptations were riding, keeping Gordy's R&B cred going strong, intragroup scarring was simply collateral damage.

In missing the last half of the British tour, the Tempts were fortunate to miss its intramural backbiting, which centered around Gordy's blatant favoritism toward the Supremes and slavish attention to Ross. While the troupe rode in buses and stayed in middling hotels, where such "luxuries" as functional ice machines were rare, Gordy squired his "girls" around in limos and stayed with them in castles and palaces as guests of enthralled royalty.

Yet the Temptations, who were moving almost stealthily in a kind of R&B buffer zone, seemed insulated against such side issues—or were they? For his part, Otis, always the good company soldier—part of the reason why Eddie and David in particular often couldn't stand him—professes to having no gripe with Gordy's priorities back then. "Nah. We knew Berry was paying close attention to the Supremes. Why wouldn't he? They were having hits back to back to back. And naturally, with the romance Berry was having with Diana, that increased his attention. But it didn't really affect us. We were happy for them, 'cause we'd gotten real close to them. And we were having our own hits, making money, doing our own thing. We were doing okay."

However, his goombah Melvin professed a diametrically opposite take in the 1986 book *Motown: Hot Wax, City Cool & Solid Gold*, by J. Randy Taraborrelli, to wit: "By design, Motown was not giving us the certain impetus to push all the way over, like they did Diana Ross. I feel like that, and if anyone don't like it, I *still* feel like that."

Otis was correct on one count: the Tempts *were* close to the Supremes. In his case, literally so with Florence Ballard, with the two of them carrying on a quiet but intense affair over the first half of the decade, to end only when the two groups' schedules almost never coincided.

“Flo and I clicked on a sexual and emotional level. She was a hot-blooded woman, a big-time woman. I mean, she taught *me* about sex. She had these expressions for when she wanted to do it. Like she’d say, ‘Big Daddy, let’s shoot the habit to the rabbit.’ Or she’d go, ‘Let me kiss the monkey on the bald spot.’ You gotta love a girl like that, right? But there was more to her than that. Flo was like a little girl with a world of hurt inside her.”

Ballard, who’d been date-raped in the early 1960s, loathed Diana Ross for co-opting the group Ballard had founded and, whittling Flo and Mary Wilson’s once large role down to that of near-insignificant backup singers. Knowing that Ross, egged on by Gordy, wanted to kick her out, Ballard overreacted in spite, tanking up on booze and pills and letting herself get too corpulent to squeeze into those glittery gowns. Seeing her go downhill, Otis tried to steer her away from her babble about wanting to do in Ross—and just have her do him. But by 1966, Ballard was a train wreck and walking the last mile at Motown, with the end of the road a year later. And as with others who would walk that same route, there was nothing Otis or anyone could do to save her.

The Temptations would have their own problems with Diana Ross. For now, though, they indeed had few peeves. Even money seemed readily available to them, to the great envy of other Motown acts. By contrast, Gordy would have to sign off on the Supremes’ every expense, from their homes within a one-block radius on affluent Buena Vista Avenue and their identical Cadillacs on down to their gowns and wigs. Lesser Motown lights, especially the fading girl groups, could only expect to see limited funds, and certainly nothing like Gordy’s regular gifts to Diana Ross, which included an ankle-length white fur that, the story went, they spread out under them when they did the deed.

As it happened, though, the Tempts did raise the bar for all Motown artists when in late 1965 they broke away from ITMI’s tethers and decided that their original seven-year contract with its provision holding their income in escrow was beneath their station.

“We just wanted to pay ourselves,” Otis says. “We wanted our own organization. We wanted to make our budgets, pay for our uniforms, transportation, and not have Motown do everything. So we amended the contract and just started doing all that ourselves.”

Or so they believed. Gordy did in fact allow them the sovereignty to draw money from their accounts and pay for their homes and cars out of their own pockets, something he plainly knew was reasonable now that they weren't kids anymore. As Don Foster explains, "The Tempts were men, I mean, Paul was what, twenty-six? And guys want their own money to do their own thing. The Supremes were young girls, twenty, twenty-one. We needed to look after them. Hey, there was a *big* difference. I was the Supremes' road manager before Berry put me with the Tempts, and I was so fucking nervous with them. You had three young, sexy girls out on the road with very little protection. I had to stop all the creatures out there who were after them.

"That's different from a bunch of older guys feeling their own testosterone. I mean, Berry couldn't give a shit about a guy getting a piece of ass on the road. And they did. Did they ever. So this carried over to their finances. You wanted to protect the girls, who didn't know anything about stuff like that.

"Then too, the Supremes were Berry's main investment, they had become the hot group at Motown. And for Berry it was a personal thing; they had come out of his vision for the company. With the Tempts, and after that the Four Tops, he told them, 'You're big boys, do your own thing.'"

What he didn't tell them was that the same ITMI stranglehold existed on what they were entitled to know about their overall worth and on what they could draw from. While they signed their own tax forms, they never saw what those forms looked like filled in; only the ITMI accountants did. Although the rules were bent enough for the Tempts to hire the big accounting firm Plante & Moran, they had no direct access to the books. On the road, they couldn't free the purse strings. Not with Foster controlling them.

"If they came to me and wanted money, they got it," he says. "But I made them sign for it. And when we came off the road, I'd meet with their accountants and go over every penny of the expenditures, all the hotel bills, airfare, tips, food, the band, uniforms, whatever. I was also cashing their weekly expense checks, two-fifty a week. So if they had \$3,000 in profits coming off the road, it might only have worked out to five hundred, or less, coming to them.

"Of course, they didn't recognize that they'd taken two hundred here, five hundred there. Eddie was the one responsible for the suits

they wore, he was the Fancy Pants. And when the bill from the tailor shop came in, I paid it, not Eddie. When they would try on a new suit, they didn't realize they were trying on five hundred dollars. But someone had to pay for that shit."

They would eventually wise up about these matters, as they would about shortfalls in their record royalties. But for now it was good enough to bitch and moan as a mandatory ritual while enjoying the illusory freedom to grab comforting piles of cash. From where Otis sat, "Motown was doing just fine by us," especially when one of Gordy's adjutants would draw five envelopes from his jacket pocket and hand them one by one to the Temptations. Once, he says, a Motown guy came onto the tour bus looking for them. "He handed us the envelopes and inside each one was a check for \$18,000. I damn near had a heart attack."

These sweet—if perhaps less than whole—emoluments made for some sudden upward mobility for all of the Temptations, though for only one of them did it seem to go to his head. While the group moved haltingly to a comfortable rhythm of hits, they lived without pretense according to their means, with no great expectation of future wealth. Otis had by early 1965 finally ended his doomed marriage to Jo, who remained with their son Lamont in the Philadelphia Street apartment while Otis packed his bags and moved to a flat in the LaSalle Gardens housing complex on Davison Street, just blocks from 2648 West Grand Boulevard. With him came his faithful crutch Melvin Franklin, who'd begun a serious romance with a girl named Toni and with her took a place on the second floor just above Otis's dwelling on the ground floor. Though Otis seems to recall that the two were married, there is no record of such a union, and he allows that "they may have just lived together, but it sure seemed like a marriage because they were inseparable."

Eddie, meanwhile, did get it on paper—many wondering if he was under orders to do so by his fiancée, Pat, a strong-willed, demanding woman with a hard stare that could melt a mama's boy like Eddie. Indeed, she seemed to be quite nearly a stand-in for Miss Lee Bell, sparing him the need to act unnaturally macho, or the urge to return the admiring affections of numerous women at every concert—at least

not too openly. Around Motown it was said that Eddie was scared of death of Pat Kendricks, with just cause if she had actually warned him, as he told people, that if she ever caught him cheating on her she'd "cut off my balls."

Henpecked as he was at home, Eddie clearly longed for the freedom of the road, though that was no bargain either when his homeboy-turned-nemesis Paul became dictatorial. And yet the queer dynamic between the two erstwhile Primes seemed to have a component that kept them linked to each other as part of their personal competition. After sharing living quarters in the days when they'd crashed in friends' places for lodging, they were never more than a few doors apart, even after each had taken a wife, Paul a girl named Mary, or, as her friends called her, "Mamie," who was as effacing and subservient as Pat was domineering.

The core foursome of the Temptations reacted to sudden semi-wealth sanely and customarily. Otis, not knowing how long the good times would last, subsequently purchased a two-family town house on Wisconsin Street in the Eight Mile section of northwestern Detroit, renting out the downstairs apartment to foot the carrying charges. Melvin, in turn, moved with Toni to a small home not far away on Cherry Lawn Road. And, still unable to break their yoke, Eddie and Paul bought homes in the same neighborhood in Palmer Park.

And then there was David, who could no more stay under one roof, or act sanely, any longer than he could keep his fly up. As that was almost never, by 1964 he'd already skipped out on his wife, Sandra, and now two infant daughters—another, Nedra, having been born barely months after he split—to live with Genna Sapia, a twenty-year-old Baltimore girl he'd met in Atlantic City during a Temptations gig there and persuaded to move to Detroit, where she began working as a go-go dancer in the clubs.

While not divorcing Sandra for another decade, he lied to Genna that she had died in childbirth—a ghoulish fib given that his own mother had died as a consequence of giving birth to *him*. He then knocked up Genna too, but even before she began to show he was long gone, to begin surely the most psychotic, sadomasochistic intra-Motown relationship of all.

This, of course, was the one with Tammi Terrell, who may have been the second most disordered Motown player, after Ruffin. Only nineteen when she arrived at Motown in 1965, the pixieish chanteuse already owned a long, smudged history. Born in Philadelphia as Thomasina Montgomery, she'd had some mildly successful records before James Brown saw her perform and used her as a backup singer in the Godfather of Soul's churning, frenetic inner-city Revue—and, as her family would claim years later, as his sex toy and whipping post. Clearly, she had the instincts and scars of a far older, burdened woman. Early in 1965 she had wed, appropriately, heavyweight boxer Ernie Terrell, who was a hot item that year for winning the vacant title after Muhammad Ali had been stripped for draft-dodging (two years later, reinstated, Ali would torture him mercilessly in the ring winning it back). Yet it's doubtful that Tammi ever married Terrell. More likely, she merely requisitioned his surname to create for herself a higher-visibility stage persona.

Gordy signed her after seeing her perform in Detroit, but her early records went nowhere. She did, however, climb into a bed with Ruffin at the seedy downtown Algiers Hotel only hours after they met in a club. Their chemistry was immediate and nuclear, and soon they were living together in a series of apartments around town, with Ruffin blowing gobs of cash so that they could wear matching mink and sable outfits and garish gold and diamond rings and watches. If this seemed like a free ride for Tammi on the Ruffin/Temptations money train, it's plausible that David believed *he* was riding on *hers*, since Tammi had told him, fancifully, that she was due to collect a million-dollar trust fund when she turned twenty-one.

Such a supposition on Ruffin's part would have been a surprise to no one, it being the case that for years before—and years after—he merrily mooched off a profusion of women, taking from one to help woo the next. Jimmy Ruffin called it “pimping,” telling Genna Sapia that all his kid brother saw in women were “dollar signs.” To David, though, this was a rather romantic habit; he was, he insisted, something of a Robin Hood. “I don’t call it pimping,” he once explained to Genna. “They just give me stuff.” It was a simple process: the other women, he said, “bought your clothes and paid your rent.” And, like all the others, she admitted, “I was gullible enough to believe him . . . just like the time he gave me the crabs and swore he got them from a cot backstage at the Apollo [Theater].”

Then again, life with Tammi surely had its fringe benefits. Nothing close to the precious, fragile protagonist on the classic duets she would record with Marvin Gaye, her image could best be summed up by a line from one of those duets—"I play the game, a fantasy. I pretend but I'm not in reality." The real Terrell was a hard-drinking, hard-loving, foulmouthed, erratic hornet of a woman—a virtual analog of Ruffin himself. And as she had done while with James Brown, she may have worn the consequences of it all over her body during her sadomasochistic romance with Ruffin.

Most of Motown, including Gordy, who lusted for her as well, looked away from the welts and bruises Terrell couldn't hide, rationalizing that she not only willingly stayed in the relationship but never really complained about it. Further, there was the old chestnut that if she was being slapped around, it was just "David being David." Even today, Otis is no more committal about the subject than the clipped understatement that "David could be kinda rough on a lady at times."

Within the Motown fraternity, who as students of Gordy were inured to see and treat women as mere objects, neither is Terrell much of a martyr, or even a victim. Because she gave as good as she got, some wonder just which of these two wretched souls had been abused more by the other. Otis, in fact, says that before Terrell hit town, he had "heard things" about her.

"When you're out there on the road like we were, you hear and see things. We knew all about Tammi and James Brown. We knew how James Brown was about women, that he would flip a woman's ass. And back then, you wouldn't ever get the woman's side so people would assume, fairly or not, he flipped her ass because she provoked him to."

Adds Billy Wilson, "When Tammi came to Motown, she was damaged goods, mentally and physically, because of James Brown having beaten the shit out of her. She was a hostile firecracker, a hot-tempered girl, a real handful. And what happened was, Genna was . . . see, not everybody kissed his ass. Genna didn't. She was a thorn in his side. So when she'd gotten kind of dumpy, David went hustling some major pussy. That was the difference between David and the rest of the Tempts. Otis never got major pussy. Melvin, Paul, Eddie; they had to settle for lesser pussy. David got major pussy. Let me tell you, Tammi Terrell was major pussy.

"Of course, she also was an accident waiting to happen. She was wild, she'd been turned on to drugs, hard drugs, cocaine. She got David hooked on drugs. That's a fact. Look, David was an accident waiting to happen too, but she got him into all his destructive behavior. Him roughing her up, I'm not making excuses for that. But it was a factor of what Tammi was."

And so, whoever was more to blame, these codependents in madness and excess just went on destroying each other, and for Ruffin the worst consequences of getting "major pussy" would become all too clear, all too soon enough.

With the money and the houses came the cars. "My first one was a Lincoln, a Mark Three," Otis remembers. "I'd seen the commercial for that damn car since I was a kid and I said, 'I'm gonna get me one of them things.'" Melvin went in a different direction, buying no less than a pink-and-white Cadillac El Dorado. "I told him, I said, 'Melvin, you better not do nothing wrong.' 'Cause everyone in town knew who was in that pink Caddy when it rolled down the street." Eschewing the de rigueur status-symbol Caddies and Lincolns that were always ostentatiously lined up on both sides of West Grand Boulevard, Eddie and Paul each went for a Corvette—Paul's painted canary yellow.

And Diamond David Ruffin hardly settled for a Dodge Dart. His choice was a stretch El Dorado convertible, either side of its green (of course—the color of money) exterior emblazoned with an icon of oversized black horn-rimmed glasses—an emblem he trusted would soon be that not merely of David Ruffin but the Temptations as a whole—and its interior fitted with white mink seat covers and floor mats. He rarely got behind the wheel; instead, he was chauffeured to and fro by a driver, usually Royce Moore. If he wanted to get around, as opposed to showing off, he'd hop onto his motorcycle and rumble, often with Tammi on the back holding on for dear life.

As Motown stars, these shiny new toys came to them at a bargain rate rarely offered those who actually needed a break to buy them. "Listen, Motown was a magic wand," says Don Foster. "Everybody wanted to be your friend, for the association. There was a Cadillac dealership down the street from Motown, and they took care of all the Motown people, including yours truly. But I only got the five-grand

one, the DeVille sedan, not the El Dorado with the leather seats. Any one of those guys could have gone there and gotten what they wanted. They probably wouldn't have needed to sign any papers.

"David always played those angles. He'd call in all the favors. Let me tell you something, David left unpaid bills in every town we ever went to. He had mink coats that he never paid for, anything you can think of. He might have been crazy and all that, but he also was opportunistic. When he saw an opportunity to take care of David Ruffin, he took it."

No matter that storms of various sorts were brewing around Ruffin, and within the group. If any of them noticed, they were having too much fun to pay much attention.

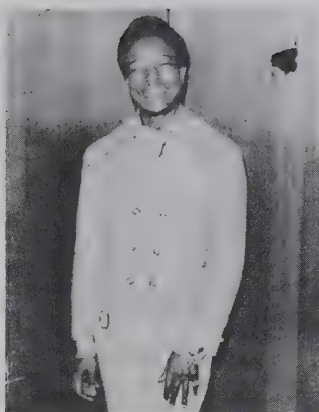


Looking fly in their slick tuxes, the El Domingos pose for this late 1950s publicity shot. Their leader, Otis Williams (second from right), was looking for bigger and better things. Soon he and Elbridge “Al” Bryant (far right) would split from the other three—(left to right) Vernard Plain, James “Pee Wee” Crawford, and Arthur Walton—to form the Distant. *Courtesy of James Crawford.*

Detroit soul legend Johnnie Mae Matthews, who signed the Distant to her company, Northern Records. It was a critical step upward for Otis, but when the Distant bitched about Johnnie Mae keeping their royalties for herself, she told them to get lost.



The other root of the Temptations was the Primes, a trio from Birmingham, Alabama, who had originally been known as the Cavaliers. By the time the Primes migrated to Detroit, Eddie Kendricks, Kell Osborn, and Paul Williams (left to right) were polished performers, though this publicity shot of them made them look as if they belonged at a sock hop.



Milt Jenkins, the Primes' manager, and for a while the Distant's manager as well, was a street hustler who wore flashy suits and drove a shiny red Cadillac. Jenkins, pictured here at his favorite hangout, the Flame Show Bar, could rustle up no offers for either group and bowed out—just in time for Kendricks and Williams to join Otis and Melvin Franklin and form the group who would become the Temptations. *Courtesy of Maxine Ballard.*



Hitsville U.S.A., the house—and empire—that Berry Gordy built, was located at 2648 West Grand Boulevard. By the early 1960s, it was a factory with an assembly line of finely crafted hit records that Gordy's critics called "black bubblegum." The Temptations had some of the chewiest.



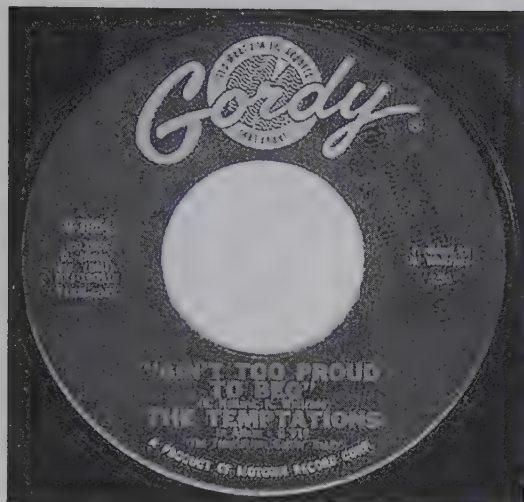
Gathered around what made them the top soul act in the world—a new record sure to sell scores of copies—the members of the “classic” Temptations lineup could not have looked more relaxed, contented, or majestic, decked out in their finest threads in this mid-1960s shot. But the smiles and perfect chemistry among them were slowly melting away as fame went to their heads and cocaine went up David Ruffin’s (second from left) nose. *Courtesy of the Motown Alumni Association.*



Ruffin (far right) seems just a bit confused as the Tempts go through their flashy paces on unaccustomed turf—in bright daylight, outside of the usual dark, smoky clubs and noisy arenas, during the taping of a television show. However, even on grass, their white shoes didn't miss a step. *Courtesy of the Motown Alumni Association.*



Almost lost in a blizzard of white, the Temptations pose for a mid-1960s publicity shot with their guitar player Cornelius Grant, who cowrote the smash hits “(I Know) I’m Losing You” and “You’re My Everything.” His tangy guitar intro on “Losing You” is a classic Temptations riff.



The original 45 rpm single “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg,” released in May 1966, was the first big Temptations record produced and co-written by Norman Whitfield. It not only became one of their most characteristic songs but began a decade-long collaboration that yielded their biggest-selling records.



Beginning with 1967’s “I Wish It Would Rain,” Norman Whitfield (left) and Barrett Strong (right) cowrote nearly all of the group’s singles for the next six years. The songwriting duo ushered the group into its psychedelic soul era, penning songs that included “Cloud Nine,” “Psychedelic Shack,” “Ball of Confusion,” “I Can’t Get Next to You,” “Just My Imagination,” and “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone,” the last three of which went to the top of the pop chart.



Being a Motown star obviously came with fringe benefits. In this shot taken backstage at Harlem's famed Apollo Theater, Otis Williams, in seminal gangsta attire, poses with a winsome fan named Pat Joseph. For all the Tempts, there were so many foxes, so little time. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*

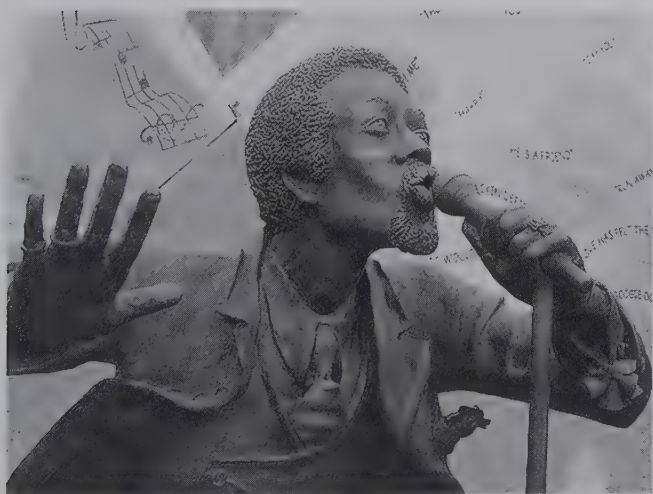
In this mid-1960s shot of Tammi Terrell and Marvin Gaye, Gaye bears a striking resemblance to David Ruffin, with whom Tammi was having a sadomasochistic relationship that left scars on her both literal and figurative. Ruffin's abuse of Terrell was passed off as "David just being David," but her tragic death from cancer in 1970 racked him with guilt.





After being fired from the Temptations in 1968, David Ruffin began a solo career, looking every bit like a star in this publicity photo of him in expensive duds, matching diamond-encrusted glasses, and just the right amount of bling. Only a few years later, he was virtually penniless, living at times

on the street, hopelessly addicted to drugs and not too proud to beg the Tempts to take him back. To their regret, they did, but only long enough for him to be fired a second time for his intolerable behavior. *Courtesy of the Motown Alumni Association.*



Lifelong smoker Eddie Kendricks succumbed to lung cancer on October 5, 1992. This statue was erected in his honor in Birmingham, Alabama. Crucial to the Temptations' recipe for success, his delicate falsetto voice and fey charm that made women of all ages swoon were the yin to the yang of Ruffin's brash bombast.



Otis Williams would hold the act together through thick and thin and constant lineup changes, and keep it contemporary through each new decade and generation. In this recent shot, looking every bit the elder statesman, he puts an arm around old boss Berry Gordy, with Temptation Ron Tyson and manager Shelly Berger to their left. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*



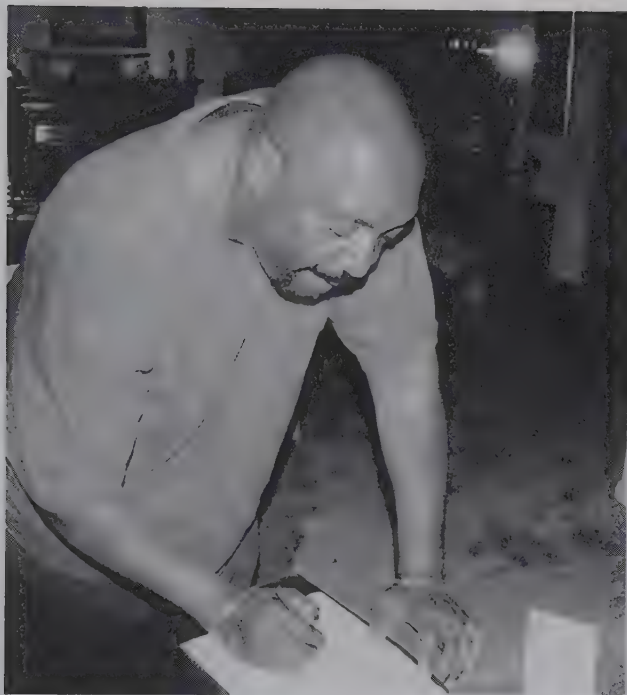
Otis catches up with other Motown warhorses Mickey Stevenson (in white), who signed the Temptations, and Norman Whitfield (far right), who once subjected them to arduous studio sessions. The photo was taken upon the release of the 1994 box set *Emperors of Soul*, produced by Harry Weinger (middle); Whitfield died in 2008. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*



During rehearsals for an early 2000s PBS show saluting Motown, Otis takes five with old chums Claudette Rogers, Smokey Robinson's former wife, and Bobby Rogers, Claudette's cousin and member of the Miracles, who cowrote with Smokey "The Way You Do the Things You Do." Between Claudette and Bobby is Ron Tyson, a Temptation since 1983. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*



Three amigos: All smiles are Otis, longtime Temptations manager Shelly Berger, and the group's venerable guitar player, Cornelius Grant, who for a time was partners with Otis and Melvin in a production company. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*



This is a ritual Otis has practiced perhaps every day for nearly half a century—signing an autograph. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*



Hanging backstage before a recent Temptations concert, Otis polishes off a plate of chicken as he goes over the songs on that night's set list with the group's musical director, Bob Farrell.



Recording and touring has kept Otis busy and vital, but his passion for artwork has likely kept him sane. He is seen in this photo perched at his drawing table at home, working on a pencil sketch montage of the Temptations' long history. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*



Whatever else occupies his time and thoughts, for Otis it all boils down to this—being onstage, singing and sweating for his supper, even if it's in a candy-striped suit. Here, at a February 27, 2009, concert at the Capital One Bank Theatre in Westbury, New York, Otis (center) works the crowd while his cohorts—(from left) Ron Tyson, Joe Herndon, Terry Weeks, and Bruce Williamson—stand in respectful silence. But only until the next downbeat.



This close-up shot during a recent concert—which Otis describes as “Joe Herndon, Terry Weeks and me getting down”—shows the intensity that still spills from a Temptations live performance even after all these years. *Courtesy of Otis Williams.*

9

All I Need

If the Temptations' hits since "My Girl" weren't spectacular chart climbers, they were seamless in continuity and content, and with their built-in R&B appeal they were heard by far more ears than the pop chart placings would indicate. The beat went on with the next single, which was originally intended to be the Smokey Robinson–Ronnie White "Don't Look Back," cut in May 1965. Cadged again from the Impressions' "say amen soul," it deviated from the norm by giving the lead to Paul, whose heartfelt baritone found the perfect middle ground between the love ballad it ostensibly was and a gospel-tinged, socially conscious plea, apparent in such lyrics as, "If you just put your hand in mine, we're gonna leave all our troubles behind . . . and we won't look back."

The flip was to be the Smokey–Bobby Rogers "My Baby," recorded three months later as a slightly sped-up redux of "Since I Lost My Baby." On this, an Earl Van Dyke honky-tonk piano riff bled into a drum-and-bass-driven swing beat and another of Ruffin's restrained but still gritty lead vocals waxing romantic to the girl who "sets my soul on fire" and has "kisses so sweet she knocks me off my feet." There was also a neat cascade of each Temptation's voice repeating the title line.

That the latter song more faithfully adhered to the "formula"—the dramatic horn ruffles and swirling strings atop a rumbling beat—explains

why when the record was released on September 20 the DJs turned over the disc to play it instead, necessitating a rerelease ten days later with “My Baby” as the A-side. The October 16 issue of *Billboard* carried the compulsory rave, calling it “an easy smooth rocker with the potential of another ‘My Girl.’”

Not quite that, “My Baby” made it to No. 13 pop and No. 4 R&B at Christmastime. That’s when the DJs took a belated listen to “Don’t Look Back” and began playing *it* in rotation, extending the record’s run by a few weeks, hitting No. 83 pop, No. 15 R&B. By then, the song had become so popular in concert that the group took to using it as their closing number—with Paul, clearly delighted that he could step from the background, with a special move leading a hip-thrusting group strut first in a circular weave, then off into the wings, always to wild cheering from the audience. This ritual, a typically boisterous rendition of which can be heard on the 1967 *Temptations Live!* album, would remain the show-ender, virtually intact, until Williams’s departure from the group, and the nuance of the song would stoke covers by such disparate voices as Al Green, Bobby Womack, the Persuasions, and a Peter Tosh collaboration with Mick Jagger and Keith Richards on Tosh’s *Bush Rock* album.

Both sides of the record would go onto, and drive, the next Temptations LP, *The Temptin’ Temptations*, which even though these and “Since I Lost My Baby” were the only hits out of the dozen tracks of mainly B-sides and unreleased rejects, still rose to No. 11 on the pop album chart, again No. 1 on the R&B.

“Don’t Look Back” in particular also led Smokey to want to keep spreading the group’s vocal wealth and thereby keep the Ruffin-fronted songs from seeming stale. As a follow-up, he came in with a tune to be fronted by Eddie, “Get Ready,” which returned them to the powdered-sugar pop-soul of “The Way You Do the Things You Do.” Tickled in the same way by Eddie’s falsetto on such mirthful fluff as “Tweedle-dee, tweedle-dum, look out baby ’cause here I come,” it spilled out as a storybook tale set to the high-octane Motown beat. However, after being released on February 2, 1966, with the Robinson-Moore “Fading Away” on the flip, “Get Ready” unexpectedly tanked, dying at No. 29 in early spring—though it did fly all the way to No. 1 R&B.

Rather than bridging the pop/soul gap, then, the Temptations were solidifying as an R&B act with only fluctuating and seemingly fading crossover appeal. And so this juncture had brought them to a

fateful crossroads. Should they continue on the same locus of limited pop appeal, with its concomitant downgrading in Gordy's lofty plans for Motown, or go in a different direction, under different supervision, that might stoke more of a pop fire?

As it happened, the answer came in the pestering advances of the Motown social climber who had been stalking them from the start.

As "Get Ready" stalled on the charts, the happiest man at Motown was Norman Whitfield, the old Silver Fox, who'd been pining to produce the Temptations for years but had to settle for table scraps. Aside from his collaboration with Eddie Holland sprucing up Eddie Kendricks's "The Girl's Alright With Me," Whitfield had only begged his way to producing for them a trio of tunes he'd cowritten, "The Further You Look, the Less You See" with Smokey, and with Holland "Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me So Blue)" and "(Talking 'Bout) Nobody but My Baby," the latter making him a few bucks on the reverse of "My Girl."

Since early 1963, though, what little he had done with the group sat in the can, including another composition with Holland, "I Gotta Know Now," which he cut originally with Mary Wells. By now, too, Whitfield himself had become stagnant, having done nothing of substance since he wrote and produced the Marvelettes' "Too Many Fish in the Sea" in 1964. More and more, his Temptations fixations weren't only based on artistic preference but because they offered him the best chance of unearthing a hit.

"Norman saw them as a meal ticket, and he was just a pest about getting them for himself," says Mickey Stevenson. "It got to where we couldn't have an A&R meeting without Norman saying, 'I got the next Temptations hit!' Everyone would look at him, like, 'Norman, chill out,' 'cause the Tempts were Smokey's until further notice. Even Eddie [Holland] would tell him to leave it alone. He'd say, 'Man, you gotta wait your turn.'

"Now, don't get the idea Norman didn't love and respect Smokey. Norman *was* waiting, but he was a smart cat. He wasn't letting anybody get in line ahead of him. And when his turn came, he was gonna be ready."

With immaculate irony, it came after "Get Ready," making that song seem in retrospect as if it was sung for him. At the time it was

chosen as the Temptations' latest single, Whitfield was convinced *he* had the better bet with another song he'd written with Holland, the coolly titled "Ain't Too Proud to Beg." Not that Eddie necessarily agreed, recalling that "I had no great hopes that we would beat out Smokey." Pest that he was, Norman had already wangled two sessions to record the song. Both times, Gordy and the Friday morning tribunal nixed it, with Gordy saying it needed more oomph overall and more "story" in the lyrics about a guy so consumed by desire and pride for a woman that he would "plead to you baby, if pleadin' keeps you from walkin' out that door."

As emotionally raw as it was the first time Whitfield cut it, Gordy's nays kept him reaching for more expressions of manhood-gelding. When he took the group back into the studio for the third time, on January 11, 1966, the lyrics included no less castrato a line than "Now I've heard a crying man is half a man, with no sense of pride / But if I have to cry to keep you I don't mind weeping, if it'll keep you by my side." If "My Girl" was a sob of quiet desperation, "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" was screaming supplication. And Whitfield was prepared to go to war with it as his cudgel.

"That was really the beginning of Norman getting a little crazy with his productions," says Otis. "He came in like he was Napoleon, he wanted to take over the world."

Never a mellow, sunny bloke like Smokey, Whitfield now became positively grim. He hectored musicians and singers, badgered engineers, and put the singers through the mill. Where Smokey and most other Motown producers preferred their work to take form and character from the energy and synergy within the studio walls, Whitfield's method was more like creating a product not unlike any other identifiable commodity, something like vinyl or Coca-Cola or Spam, built on precise measures of additives. "For Smokey, it was the song; for Norman it was the *sound*," is how Stevenson defines it. "Not just any sound, *his* sound."

This, of course, was an animal already perfected by, most notably, Phil Spector with his "Wall of Sound," a product so distinct as to be incapable of replication. Whitfield, though, was too respectful of the music of the streets to overprocess and homogenize it. Neither was he nearly as anal as Spector—or even Smokey. As Otis relates, Whitfield's reputation as a stickler for detail and the manner of

a martinet was not quite right. “Smokey worked you just as hard as Norman. And Smokey was actually more organized than Norman. Take the background vocals. Smokey had each of those parts written out, whereas Norman would just show us the melody, the hook; everything else we had to figure out ourselves.

“I think Norman was a little afraid to mess with our harmonies, which we knew better than anyone how to do, the shadings, the separation of the voices. He would only want us to make sure we stayed in the pocket. Other than that we had a free hand.”

However, Whitfield’s pathological quest to make the perfect record, with the perfect sound, combined with a growing arrogance and hostility to others’ opinions, made for some long—that is, *long*—and tormenting sessions.

“Norman wouldn’t ever be satisfied,” Otis says. “He always had another take in him. He had to hear something that he wanted, and if he didn’t we could forget about getting out of there, sometimes until the sun went down and came up again.”

“Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” was one of those times. Whitfield didn’t set them free until he had gotten Ruffin—a natural to take the lead for his way with an overwrought vocal—to stretch even his limits. Norman had him sing in the key of D, a notch above his normal comfort zone, and do so many takes that he was drenched in sweat in the airless dungeon of Studio A, his glasses slipping down his nose. His searing, itchy baritone made him sound even more frenzied and unhinged than usual.

Whitfield’s arrangement chewed on a simple cha-cha beat at its core, shaken and stirred by “additives” such as its impatient drum-cymbal-tambourine intro ushering Ruffin to his immortal opening line—“I *know* you wanna leave me, but I refuse to let you go-ooo / If I have to beg and plead for your sympathy, I don’t mind ’cause you mean that much to me”—before the band kicked in with some very James Brown-like horn thrusting out of a trough of string and piano runs anchored by Jamerson’s bass and Robert White’s *chinking* electric guitar accents on the beat.

The chorus the Temptations worked out played neatly off Ruffin’s verbal squalls, the call-and-response pattern tightly epoxied yet transparent enough for each voice to distinctly arise from the brume, from the burr of Melvin’s bass to Eddie’s dreamy high tenor. Cleverly,

Whitfield with unblemished timing halted the wild instrumentation three times in midsong to accentuate quiet intensity, with a ticklish bongo circling long, drawn-out horn riffs and a stiletto-like bass thump as Ruffin intoned vows such as “to *sleeeeep* on your doorstep all night and day just to keep you from walking away.”

Norman, with reason, believed he had produced the perfect record. Having completed it just as “My Baby” had peaked at No. 13, he reckoned the time was right for Gordy to break Smokey’s hold on the Tempts. It didn’t. Noncommittal, he and his panel of yes-men and -women stayed true to the artful adjutant and “Get Ready” got the nod. “I remember that I loved [‘Ain’t Too Proud to Beg’],” insisted Stevenson. “But, you know, it was Berry and Smokey so . . . Actually, there were times we did overrule Berry. In fact, one of those times was when he had a record for the Tempts but Smokey came in with ‘The Way You Do the Things You Do’ and he knew it was better than his. But this time he felt strongly about sticking with Smokey. You wanted to keep a roll going and you weren’t going to disrupt that off a number thirteen hit, which most acts would kill for.”

It was merely incidental, and irrelevant to Gordy, that the Temptations themselves weren’t knocked out by “Get Ready,” which Otis believes “lacked an edge”—a conclusion no doubt underscored by the contrast when they recorded “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” a few weeks later. But the headstrong Whitfield wouldn’t fall on his sword. In a state of shock over the rejection, his veins were “popping out his neck,” according to Cornelius Grant, who was in the room. Seeing him sulk and gnash his teeth, Gordy, in lieu of issuing his record, issued him a sop: should “Get Ready” not go Top 10 on the pop chart, he’d put out “Beg” next, though it’s likely he believed the former would make it moot.

When “Get Ready” came up nineteen notches short, Gordy couldn’t find his way out of the promise he’d given in haste. On May 1, “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” was released, with, as a make-good to Smokey, a song of his, “You’ll Lose a Precious Love,” on the flip, although Stevenson says Smokey, the ultimate Motown company man, was typically courtly about the next Temptations single not being his. “Smokey just wanted the best product out. ‘Cause he loved Motown. For him it wasn’t the artist or the writer or producer; it was the whole idea of Motown, of keeping it alive, moving forward. To do that, you had to

have the best product. Smokey wasn't just a musical genius, he was an honest one. He knew that when the best product came around, you went with it. He'd stood aside before for Norman, with the Marvelettes. And he knew what we had in 'Ain't Too Proud to Beg.' We all knew."

As with a good many Motown hits, the success of any given song often seemed incidental to its chartings, since the mechanisms determining how high a song charted were impossibly arcane. The only tangible gauge was the reaction of live audiences. Performing "Get Ready" on the road in early 1966, Otis recalls that the Temptations had every indication that by the warm response to it, the song was "a monster," and they immediately began using it, logically, as the opening number of the show, then and for years to come, its relatively weak chart standing notwithstanding. The same anomaly marked "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," which by the week of May 14 had made the *Billboard* "Pop Spotlights" page—"a pulsating wailer with a teen-aimed lyric," went the paper's huzzah this time, which explained why the song went all the way to No. 1 R&B, where it stayed for a month, but not why it stopped at No. 13 on the pop chart in early summer. In hindsight, this is baffling given that "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" is perhaps the second most identifiable Temptations song and spawned covers by the likes of the Rolling Stones, the Count Basie Orchestra, Willie Bobo, and Rick Astley. On the hustings, crowds couldn't get enough of it, demanding the Tempts sing it over and over. Whenever they did, Ruffin's bleeding intro alone would spark near hysteria.

Says Otis, "To us it *felt* like a number one, more so than 'My Girl.' We were told that record was played *everywhere*, and wherever we went they kept telling us it was number one. So don't ask me how a record like that only gets to number 13. That's a mystery to me, man."

Smash that the song was taken to be, the Temptations spent days developing moves to power it along onstage. Paul, working them out with the recently hired Motown choreographer, former Broadway hoofer Cholly Atkins, and Atlantic City lounge choreographer Lon Fontaine, whom Mickey Stevenson brought in expressly to further burnish the Tempts' act, let not as much as a second lapse without something happening with their limbs and hips. The result was a welter of expertly knitted 1960s dance crazes like the Swim, Frug, Jerk, and Hitchhike. Ruffin would begin in the middle of the pack, hands under his chin in prayer pose on the line "If I have to beg and plead for your

sympathy,” and point to a flexed bicep under his tight jacket on “Let your friends laugh, even this I can stand . . .” Fists chugging, Loco-Motion-style, they would branch into their “shovel-dig” stroll, joined by Ruffin on the break before, with split-second timing, he would wind up back in his wing position just as he was about to sing the next verse.

This was really when the Tempts’ persona took flight within the mainstream. Among white, pop-oriented music buyers only now discovering the Temptations, even their toned-down paces were like nothing they’d ever seen. Realizing the marketing value, Motown ran ads in the teen music magazines with a sequence of pictures of them in cool leather vests and slacks demonstrating, as the ad read, “the seven basic steps of the ‘Temptation Walk,’ a prancing, high-stepping routine created by the sensational Temptations,” which it called “the dance craze sweeping the country”—though of course there was little chance that the Walk would rival the Hully Gully or Cool Jerk, given that only the Temptations could do it properly.

Up to now, their chance to display such moves on national TV had been scarce, the most noteworthy being a February 1965 gig on the ABC prime-time show *Shindig*, on which they sang “My Girl.” There were also shots on a June 1965 CBS special hosted by New York DJ Murray the K, *It’s What’s Happening, Baby*, along with the Supremes, the Miracles, Martha and the Vandellas, Marvin Gaye, Ray Charles, the Ronettes, Herman’s Hermits, and the Righteous Brothers; and a cameo in a February 1966 ABC documentary, *Anatomy of Pop*, a dissection of the black roots of pop that includes a few priceless minutes of grainy footage of the Supremes and the Temptations inside Studio A backed by the Funk Brothers, some of the very few images of this sort ever filmed.

“Beg” was one thing they need not do to garner these sort of appearances. Another was an early August 1966 appearance on Dick Clark’s venerable *American Bandstand*, though this kind of genuflection to the teen market would soon be in their rearview mirror. Suddenly, the garish purple suits ordered up by Paul in chintzy tailor shops were replaced by more muted grays, blues, and beige, with Motown executives now taking an interest in how they looked. Their processed hair was now dried and cropped into modest, “acceptable” Afros. At Atkins’s instruction, Ruffin’s spins and splits were cooled just a bit and clipped to half speed, the microphone flipped not quite so far in the air. In the

crossover soul of the mid-'60s, wild was out, class with subtle titillation was in. They could still, as Paul said, "sell sex," but they had to do it with a wink instead of a bump and a grind.

Sometimes it seemed that much of the coarse emotion of a song like "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" came out in the wash, though there was still plenty of it left over to satisfy most fans. In ironing out the rough edges, Otis clarifies, "We were letting it all out in the studio, but our audiences were changing, James Brown was toning it down too, when 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag' and 'I Feel Good' were big crossover hits and he would go on Ed Sullivan and have to tone it down."

Those audiences, it followed, now were getting older, and whiter. Black fans who had or soon would have grown up with them had families to feed, house payments to make. The civil rights struggle receded before the great white cause, that of ending the burgeoning war in Vietnam. Black activism grew more threatening and marginalized, especially after the explosion of race riots in Harlem in 1964, Watts the next year, though for now Detroit stayed calm. The sharpening of black culture meant that black artists would have to deal with it. But Berry Gordy's strict edict was to keep away from such literally burning issues, and to some it was audible proof that Motown had forfeited its soul. However, Motown was the largest black-owned corporation in America, and that counted for something—Gordy's strong cred in the community at large.

For the follow-up to "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," Whitfield seemed to pay homage to the forbearing Smokey. He came in with "Beauty Is Only Skin Deep," a song right out of the latter's playbook with its rib-poking *bons mots* about a bloke's belated revelation that "a pretty face may be some guys' taste, but I'll take lovin' in its place," concluding that "If you're looking for a lover, don't judge a book by its cover." A rip of the hilarious 1963 Fabulous Jimmy Soul smash "If You Wanna Be Happy," it was a lighthearted romp right up Eddie Kendricks's alley, but coming off "Beg" the lead had to go to David—as unlikely a candidate as anyone on earth to espouse the song's altruistic creed. But his ability to transform any lyric into the stuff of suffering added the usual Ruffin agony, as if he only *wished* romance could be that easy.

Whitfield played off the heavy and the light in his own way, balancing the nursery-rhyme intro with its xylophone arpeggio and

playful bongo with another frontal attack of horns and a jump beat that churned around dramatic lulls, letting Ruffin fire up each verse. And in the background, voices knowingly greeted Ruffin's innocent protestations with a sarcastic "*ohhhh yeah!*" as if they didn't buy any of it. The public surely got it. Without a hedge the record, released in August 1966 with Smokey's "You're Not an Ordinary Girl" on the back, streaked up the charts, predictably, to No. 1 R&B—but this time running further up the pop, eventually stopping at No. 3 in the fall, solidifying Whitfield's grip on the group.

By then, with the Temptations push on at Motown, two more albums were cranked out. In June came *Gettin' Ready*, filling out "Get Ready" and "Beauty Is Only Skin Deep" with unremarkable material and two notable curios, "Not Now (I'll Tell You Later)," cowritten by Smokey and Otis and featuring backing vocals by the Supremes, and the original version of Whitfield's "Too Busy Thinking About My Baby," fronted by Eddie, three years before Marvin Gaye had a monster hit with it. The LP went to No. 1 R&B, No. 12 pop. Then in November would come the obligatory *Greatest Hits* package that clocked in at No. 1 and No. 5, respectively.

There would now be a new Temptations single every three or four months, though because they were on the road so much they had to cram in multiple sessions when at home. The first batch, in September 1966, yielded "(I Know) I'm Losing You," another "wailer" that began as an idle riff by Cornelius Grant, who'd not been to a Temptations session before but had been credited as a cowriter on the flip side of "Since I Lost My Baby" after giving a few chords and incomplete lyrics to Smokey, who turned it into "You've Got to Earn It."

"I didn't think very much about being a songwriter, and even less because of 'Earn It.' They used to say if you had a B-side of a big hit, it was as good as having the A-side. But that wasn't true. I got a few bucks, that was it. In this business, everybody gets screwed in the beginning.

"(I Know) I'm Losing You' came about because I was in the studio fooling around on a Gibson Birdland. I played this slow riff of fifth notes . . . *da da da da, daa daa*. Norman heard it and said, 'That's the intro!' And he and Eddie Holland wrote a song around it."

And a beaut of one, with Grant playing his riff, keying a tambourine and rumbling bass line for Ruffin's latest open-wound vocal, addressing the woman whose "love is fading away from me" with the searing indictment that "your touch has gone cold, as if someone else controls your very soul"—part of a harrowing Eddie Holland rune of self-torture and paranoia. It left open the possibility that all the indictments were self-fulfilling prophecies that had nurtured in the mind of the agonist, to the point where he swore he could look into the woman's eyes and see a "face that doesn't belong to me."

The hook, with Ruffin cooing, "Ooooooh baby, I'm losing you" would in midsong elicit a collective falsetto background chorus of "*losing yooooou*," followed by a jazzy horn break ending in a staccato three-note fusillade—*bom! bom! bom!*—a passage Whitfield made sure was eminently danceable so the Tempts could roll with it onstage, a major consideration in writing their material now. "(I Know) I'm Losing You"—originally titled "I Don't Want to Love You" but changed because a song was already out by that name—was released on November 2 with an old Whitfield-Holland track from 1962, "I Couldn't Cry If I Wanted To," on the flip and retraced almost step for step the path of "Skin Deep," running to number No. 1 R&B, No. 8 pop in early 1967.

Next, from a series of February sessions, a follow-up was chosen, with Whitfield himself receding temporarily for a track not produced by him, though one could contend it *was* by him, once removed, since it came from a man Whitfield had cloned in his image. This was Frank Wilson, another young go-getter on a hard upward thrust at Motown, who after he failed as a singer was put to work as a producer in Motown's nascent "MoWest" operation in L.A., gaining traction overseeing MoWest's one major star, Brenda Holloway. Recognizing that the pathway to power was in Detroit, Wilson made regular trips there during which he sucked up to Whitfield, who took a liking to the brash newcomer who no doubt reminded him of himself.

Whitfield invited Wilson to observe Temptations sessions in Studio A. When Wilson came in with a song for the group, "All I Need," written with MoWest staff writer R. Dean Taylor, Whitfield had Eddie Holland firm up the lyrics and let Wilson run the session to cut it.

He did so in Whitfield's style, wasting not a second before unleashing an eddy of horns and the usual chugging backbeat under and around

Ruffin's prickly plea to his woman that all he needed was "just to hear you say you'll forgive me, forgive me, baby" and to "touch my hand, say you'll understand"—an appeal that, unlike the one in "Beauty Is Only Skin Deep," *was* easy to imagine him making in real life, boulder that he was.

Wilson also had a couple of new wrinkles, the main one being to use the remarkable female backing trio the Andantes to sweeten the chorus, as Holland-Dozier-Holland had done on numerous Four Tops songs. "All I Need" was actually smoother in tone than Whitfield's scratchy, R&B-dipped sound, and more adventurous, such as with its funky guitars. These worked well enough for Whitfield to make a mental note to implement funk-rock guitar licks on future sessions, leading him to mull a broader range for the Tempts beyond sizzling or yearning love songs awash in James Brown-style bombast. As for Wilson, the production would soon make him a Motown VIP, too, after the song was issued in mid-April backed with the Eddie Holland-Ivy Jo Hunter "Sorry Is a Sorry Word" and hit pay dirt, No. 8 pop and No. 2 R&B in early summer.

Now under the gun to make *his* next Temptations record just as good, Whitfield chose to break from the usual hard-driving Ruffin screamer and went with a song incubated from a lyric begun by Cornelius Grant and a new Motown songwriter named Roger Penzabene.

The song—"You're My Everything"—was stirred into a sensuous slow boil, opening with another Grant guitar lick, a few seconds of electrified guitar reminiscent of "Here Comes the Bride," leading to a massive crescendo of horns, strings, drum rolls, and cymbal crashes before Eddie began to ooze, "You surely must know magic girl, 'cause you changed my life / It was dull and ordinary. You made it sunny and bright." A concretion of strings rose and swirled deliriously around him and the chorus, which parted for Ruffin taking over the middle verse, palpably changing the mood from buttery to bitterness. For many, it was that dual, contrasting groove that took the song to a higher level.

Its route already paved, "Everything," released in mid-June with the B-side a cover of the Miracles' "Been Good to You," hit the market running and climbed to No. 6 R&B, No. 3 pop in late summer (the flip broke away for a brief run of its own to No. 124). Its inclusion, with the previous two hits, on the next album, *The Temptations with a Lot o' Soul*, which was mostly a grab bag of old tracks produced by Whitfield,

Smokey Robinson, Holland-Dozier-Holland, and Ivy Jo Hunter, powered the LP to No. 7 pop and No. 1 R&B—the sixth album in a row to do the latter, a streak that would reach eight in a row and thirteen out of fifteen by the end of the decade, with *Lot o' Soul* the most successful aside from the greatest hits bundle.

By that autumn of 1967, they could fairly be called a juggernaut, more consistently so in the months ahead than even the Supremes. The latter, even with their glitz-covered relaunch as Diana Ross and the Supremes over the summer, was about to collapse into a yearlong drought. Proving just how welded Motown acts were to their writers and producers, the Supremes' sinking fortunes were collateral damage caused by Holland-Dozier-Holland's falling-out with Gordy over money issues, which led to the trio staging a "strike" that kept them out of the studio for long stretches.

As it happened, this was only one of the cracks in Motown's one-time wall of solidarity and loyalty precipitated by Gordy's ego and skinflint ways, such as his refusal to share the now obscenely profitable Motown stock with anyone outside his family, save for a token perquisite to Smokey Robinson. It didn't take long for a crack to open. Mickey Stevenson, Gordy's first executive hire and his all-around Mr. Fixit, got the same cold shoulder on stock options; but a more stinging rebuke was that his wife, singer Kim Weston, had been left on the Motown bench for two years, though she'd delivered some early hits and another with her duet with Marvin Gaye, "It Takes Two." When Mickey demanded studio time for her and was turned down, both he and Weston took a walk in late 1967, signing a deal with the West Coast branch of MGM Records.

Insulated against these kind of storm clouds, the Temptations were the model of calm and stability, their ballast being a Norman Whitfield who in the absence of HDH had risen to top dog among Motown writer-producers. Indeed, they had moved so deeply into the mainstream that Gordy now found the time ripe to put their every move under the tight control of Shelly Berger, the Hollywood sharpie he had hired in 1966 to ease the way for Motown acts to appear on the big TV variety shows and in major nightclubs, hotels, and casinos. Berger, a stubby, fast-talking, hotwired twenty-eight-year-old former showbiz

agent for, among others, Don Rickles and Dick and Dee Dee, seemed more suited to working Borscht Belt lounges than at Motown, but he had an endless supply of nerve.

Berger, working the phones nonstop from the MoWest office on Sunset Boulevard, broke in by persuading Dick Clark to devote an entire episode of his *Where the Action Is* daytime show from the Roostertail Club with nothing but Motown acts. After he booked the Supremes on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Berger swung a deal for them to appear on the show four times a year. In time, too, every big-name Motown act would make it onto Sullivan's stage as well—the Temptations' turn coming on May 28, 1967, when they shared the marquee with Robert Goulet, Tessie O'Shea, and the Pickle Brothers. Clad in beige suits with waist-cut bellhop jackets and shiny black shoes under tight ankle-length pants, they sang a medley of "My Girl" and "I'm Losing You" and, later, "Don't Look Back."

The reward for these coups was that Berger was named by Gordy as manager of the Supremes late in 1966, then the Temptations' manager early in 1967, the future of those two entities now wedded to Motown's future itself. Within the next year, plans would be set in motion to unite the two huge acts in a flood of projects that would spike both groups' profiles and the company's bottom line in the mainstream white market. By the time the plans were realized, the symmetry of the two units would include dealing with their problem children the only way they knew how—with a guillotine.

10

Runaway Child, Running Wild

Part of why Ruffin was allowed to become so malignant had to do with the same dynamic that insulated the Temptations from the rest of the Motown pack: the tightly knit, albeit fleeting fraternalism and oneness of purpose that made them a closed club to meddling outsiders. Love or hate each other at any given moment, they would have killed for each other, unless they wound up killing each other first. As a stubbornly hidebound unit, only they decided, by vote, on how they handled internal static, with no input from anyone else welcomed or much tolerated. Thus, delusional as this collective esprit was given how far they had drifted apart into their own discrete orbits, Ruffin could feel free to draw his own boundaries, assuming he was on safe ground within the club.

For three years, or since his early humility melted into coldhearted arrogance, he was right. As Otis admits, the other four Tempts knew David was playing them, that he had progressively less respect for them and the musketeer-like “Temptations forever” credo they loved to announce with such bravado at public events, arms around each other’s shoulders. Even the preshow group prayer convocation, asking

the Lord to bless and keep them, seemed now like a ruse, a burlesque, since right after the show they couldn't get away from each other fast enough, each going his own way with the floozy of his choice.

Often, Ruffin wouldn't resurface for days, after the group had long since left town for the next gig. It became so common that they'd just shrug and move on, hoping he'd get there on his own. Always, it seemed, he did, at least through mid-1967, when his lone-wolf interludes could only be explained away by the phrase Otis, then and now, repeats as a weary mantra: "That was Ruffin." As long as he showed up and killed, the irritations he caused were minor.

Meanwhile, even as the facade of unity was springing a leak, any outsiders injected into their affairs were immediately viewed with great suspicion, as if they were there so that Motown could keep tabs on the group. It even happened to, of all people, Cornelius Grant, although he had been invited in by Paul to accompany them on the road.

"I don't know why it was, but the other guys didn't take to me right away. And then one day, I don't even remember what it was about, but Melvin and I were talking, something was said, we began pushing each other. The next thing you knew, we were on the floor *biting* each other. Each of us was clamped onto the other's leg like two pit bulls, until we were bleeding. I had his teeth marks in my leg for months.

"Nothing really came of it. Nobody pulled us apart, we just stopped and basically we laughed it off. And that was when they started treating me like I was one of them. It was like I passed some kind of test."

Don Foster also had to break through the wall after coming aboard as road manager. "When I first began traveling with them, they did not trust me. Because Berry had sent me there, which to them automatically meant I was gonna rip their money off. Actually, Berry sent me to instill some professionalism on the road, to do the thing I did for the Supremes in making them always carry themselves with sophistication. Berry wanted to lift 'em up so they could also play the Copa and Vegas.

"That meant I'd be making changes, which they did not like because they were running their own ship. But it was a ship of fools, man. I mean, it had gotten to where they had their own friends, or yes-men, running around with them. It wasn't only David, they all had 'em. Well, maybe not Eddie, he was kind of a loner. But David made it a spectacle. . . . He would have his lackeys screen everyone from him, including me.

“Well, that was unacceptable. I said, ‘Uh-uh, no way. We’ve got to be a united group,’ and I started getting rid of some of these guys, or at least cut them out of some things. Like the prayer. It was a mob with all the hangers-on sticking their noses in. I told the guys, ‘It’s just gonna be you and Cornelius and me from now on, that’s it.’ I told the others, ‘Look, you guys aren’t welcome for this.’”

“After a while, I got the respect and we were a family for years. But I couldn’t ever really stop David from doing what he wanted. If a guy wants to kill himself, you can’t stop him. He’s gonna do it.”

Otis echoes that sentiment. “Yeah, we knew David was getting himself, and us, into trouble. But what can you do? You can’t go and rough him up, that would have just messed the group up even more. We just had to try to ride it out.”

What made it harder to rein in Ruffin was that, to a degree, they wished they could get the same kind of action—and tried, hard, all the Tempts helping themselves to the same buffet of easy women and progressively harder drugs. The first was a given, a matter of open bragging; the second, once it got past the usual reefer dalliance common to most musicians’ lifestyles, was a leap into virgin territory. But Ruffin seemed to stand out because he had the least reticence to push himself to the heights of excess.

Again, so did all the Tempts, in varying measures, as was obvious to anyone on the periphery who ever stood with gaping jaw watching the endless parade of women en route to a Temptation, any Temptation. “It was unbelievable,” Foster still marvels. “Having been on the road with the Supremes, I didn’t even know about groupies until I got with the Tempts. They were everywhere, black, white, in between, whatever. There was a group of women in New York who would come to all the shows there. They’d sit in the front row, legs wide open, no panties, skirts up to here. The Tempts would meet them after the show and choose which ones they wanted.”

To be sure, the other Tempts weren’t wanting. Paul’s kid brother Joe, or as they called him, “Scrooney,” came to Detroit to visit him in 1967. “The Tempts were going to do a show in Chicago and he took me along. After the show he told me to wait in the limo, but all these women were getting in, there was no room, and some guy in their

entourage told me, 'Why don't you take the bus back to the hotel?' So I got out and Paul sees me and asks, 'Why ain't you in the limo?' I told him what the guy said, and man, he was pissed. He said, 'Ride the *bus*?! You ain't ridin' no bus.' And he throws the guy out and tells him, 'You, you go ride the bus.'

"I got back in and we took off with the Tempts and these half-naked women. . . . For one night, I got to do what the Temptations did every day and night of the year."

Not that there weren't consequences at times, besides penicillin shots. Don Foster recalls various and sundry women appearing at the stage door, a little bundle of joy in their arms. "One of the bodyguards was Benny Welbourne, who we used to call 'Break-a-Brick-Benny' because he was a black belt. He'd be at the door and he'd have to stop these women. He'd come and tell me, 'Foster, there's another one out there.' They were there because they'd want to show whichever Temptation it was that their baby looked just like him. We'd tell them these women were out there. How they handled it was their business, but I'm sure there was more than a few checks sent to take care of it."

The only "official" son of David Ruffin, David Jr., his spawn by Genna Sapia, grew from tot to toddler with barely a sight of him. Anticipating just such a lack of interest by him, Genna midway through the pregnancy had told him she was considering getting an abortion, prompting him to fire back with righteous indignation, "You ain't killin' my kid!" But it was an empty show of paternal pride.

By then he was living again with Sandra and only occasionally did he drop by Genna's before the birth. Once, putting his ear to her belly, he recoiled, saying, "That motherfucker kicked me!" At the birth and thereafter, he was a no-show, and would tell people—Sandra, above all—that the child wasn't his. As Genna believed, his only interest in him was to prove to himself that he *could* sire a boy, after having three girls with Sandra.

This was in marked contrast to Paul, who in 1965 also had a "junior," Paul Lucas Williams, the second of his eventual nine children in and out of his marriage to Mary, and first of *two* bearing the name Paul Williams. He doted slavishly on his kids, in ways that the other Temptations found hard to do with theirs given how their time on the

road kept them from their families. Still, both Eddie and Melvin did help raise a horde of children—Eddie three by Pat, Melvin five by Kim—and Otis cleared time to hang with Lamont, not nearly enough to satisfy the young man but at least enough to keep his conscience clean.

David, on the other hand, seemed not to *have* a conscience about anything. The unkindest cut for both Genna Sapia and Sandra Ruffin was that as the former gave birth to his son, he was onstage in Philadelphia grandly announcing he was “engaged” to Tammi Terrell, unfurling a diamond ring that he would later tell Genna Tammi had actually bought for herself. That, like many Ruffin announcements, was nothing but a charade designed for maximum impact, not least because he was still married to Sandra at the time.

Such utter tomfoolery was common in the surreal world Ruffin had made for himself, one that bore a scant trace of reality and zero responsibility. Spending money like tap water, even with no home of his own and his habitual sponging off either Sandra or Tammi, he still quickly ran out of whatever he'd have in his pocket. Which was no mean feat, considering that by 1967 the Temptations were raking it in, grossing over a half million dollars that year alone. According to Shelly Berger, this was a direct factor of Berry Gordy's beneficence, explaining that Motown's total control of the purse strings was actually the best thing that ever happened to the Temptations, or any other Motown act.

“You see, what Motown did that no other company ever did, Berry Gordy paid accountants to watch their money. It was the only time in the history of show business, especially with black artists, that not one artist at Motown had a tax problem during those years. Their taxes were always paid, and correctly. Later, when they wanted and got their ‘freedom’ to run their own affairs, *everybody* had a tax problem, serious ones.

“Mr. Gordy knew firsthand how easy it was for black artists to be taken advantage of, left naked and in the cold. People talk about being ripped off at Motown. They don't know what they're talking about. He was *preventing* them from being ripped off, they didn't realize how much money he was saving them. He had two accountants, who were very, very conservative, the same people who were handling his own money. And all those acts were making money hand over fist because of that. So I don't want to hear that Berry Gordy ripped off his artists. That's just pure bullshit.”

Gordy's grudging concession to the Temptations to allow them an outside accounting firm, again, was more a symbolic gesture than anything else, as the firm didn't have access to Motown's books. ITMI still went on as their overlord, with Berger as their manager, technically replacing Esther Gordy Edwards in that role (Ruffin's de facto "manager," Royce Moore, was just a glorified gofer). Indeed, for all of Ruffin's choleric grouching about money, when his original contract (as an individual Motown artist, never having signed one as a Temptation) was up in 1967, he had no choice but to do the same as the other members of the group when theirs ran out, all of them signing a new four-year deal with ITMI.

Yet, failing to see Gordy as the benevolent dictator that Berger paints him as, the belief would spread from Ruffin to the others—most of all Eddie, who seemingly could be inveigled to believe anything Ruffin wanted him to—that Gordy was to blame for their own lack of financial sense and restraint. That was when the "classic five" Temptations would begin in earnest to disintegrate.

The Tempts, who beside the Supremes made the most money, blew it the fastest. "They had a joint account at the Comerica Bank right down the street from Motown," recalls Joe Williams, "and they'd clean it out. I remember one time my brother was saying how rich he was. I said, 'Yeah, huh?' and he showed me one of his paychecks. And I said, 'Where's the amount?' 'cause I thought I was looking at a serial number, there were so many digits. He said, 'That's the amount, man'—and it was over \$300,000. I was shocked at that. And then Berry would buy 'em stuff, too. When they started playing the big nightclubs, he bought them all black mink suits, three-piece suits with matching mink overcoats.

"So they had all this money. But the funny thing is, they never had any cash on 'em. They never carried money on the road but even back home they were always complaining about not having any money. I didn't understand it. I'd go, 'Where'd all that money go?'"

A lot of it, surely, went up Ruffin's nose, which was trouble for manifold reasons beyond the obvious perils it held, physically and legally, for him. The paranoia and delusions it stoked became more troublesome because of his growing influence on Eddie. Not incidentally,

both were increasingly isolated from the rest of the group, pissing off Paul to the point where he was now reliably hunkered down with Otis and Melvin on group decisions, even though he had his own feelings of alienation from them based on his long-held angst that it was really their group and that he, Eddie, and David were lodgers.

At the beginning, when he did most of the leads, he could believe what Otis says, that Paul's flair and good sense of class were what made the Tempts whole. But even if Otis is right that Paul never resented David for co-opting those throaty, soulful leads, his overall role was certainly ebbing. However, he was still a stickler for group unity, and when David and Eddie began branching off into a bloc and began to yowl about Gordy screwing the group over money, Paul knew the delicate line they were all walking. The group, he knew, was nowhere near big enough yet for Gordy not to fire any of them if he chose—he did that, after all, to Florence Ballard.

In fact, it was Paul who in the summer of 1967, only weeks before Flo was sacked, would take the lead in having the Temptations send a group telegram to Mary Wilson, which read, "Mary, stick by Florence. It may happen to you. Think about it—the Tempts." That Mary didn't take the advice proved how fragile interpersonal relationships are when inordinate wealth and fame are in the balance, a dynamic that would consume the Temptations as well. For the time being, though, Paul was adamant about staying unified, as they always were for the outside world, cutting Ruffin some necessary slack. But he wasn't about to let David ruin it by assuming he could do and say what he pleased, using Eddie as an accomplice for added leverage. Several times Paul had to talk Eddie down when David convinced him to march with him into Gordy's office so they could, as David put it, "stop that black mother-fucker from stealing money from us." The truth was that while such horrifying scenarios sprang from David's fevered mind, everyone knew he would never force the issue, all talk that he was. But with Eddie, the "quiet one" with the very tightly wound inner spring, no one doubted he *could*, if he snapped. And that had to be preempted, for his sake and the group's.

Tempering Eddie's volatility was that David could also piss *him* off, along with the rest of the group, when Ruffin went too far. For example, because Otis always urged calm, and defended Gordy's intentions, David regarded this attitude as sedition and a personal slap. As early

as 1966, he was tossing out asides about going solo, and in 1967, taking a cue from the rebranding of the Supremes, he talked about effecting the same change, with him in the Diana Ross ingénue guise—David Ruffin and the Temptations. The latter possibility made no sense, as it would implicitly relegate everyone else to the role of supporting player—making a mockery of the group’s marketable consonance, most offensively to his “ally” Eddie, whom many considered the co-lead singer. Once, Ruffin made an impromptu introduction during a show by ad-libbing, “I’m David Ruffin,” then, pointing to the others, adding after a long pause, “and these are the Temptations.” It took everything they had to keep their frozen smiles in place and not rip him limb from limb right there, though wisely he never repeated the infraction.

If these breaches of faith were meant to challenge Otis’s dominion, even scare him into seeing things David’s way, Otis looks back on them as something like bad jokes, irritating as hell but almost embarrassing in their feebleness. No one, he insists, most of all Ruffin himself, truly believed he would ever willingly leave the sinecure he’d found for the first time in his life with the Temptations.

“That was all just David playing his head games. There was no chance he’d get his way, and I don’t think it was about getting his way. He just wanted to rock the boat. But he didn’t want to get off that boat. Look at it like this: David never was a success, never could act like he did, until we brought him into the Temptations. He talked a lot of shit like that, but deep down I think he was scared of being out there alone, on his own, with no support. But he had to be David, so he’d push it. And when he did, we had to push back.”

The problem for the other Tempts was that they could only push back a little, or not at all, when, as Ruffin hoped, their own fears rose about being on *their* own, minus his voice and star power. Then too, they couldn’t really pull rank on morality matters. Indeed, for all the showy emphasis on prayer and gospel music, none of them was a choir-boy. All were drinkers, a condition exacerbated by the bustle and pressures of tightly scheduled tours more than three hundred days a year. Such pressures had converted the contents of the Thermos Paul carried from milk to hard liquor.

“Let me tell you something, my brother never touched a drop of alcohol until the mid-sixties,” says Joe Williams. “Then he was drinking Courvoisier, Cutty Sark, Jim Beam, Johnnie Walker Red. It was the

only way he could unwind from all those shows and plane rides. People always talk about Paul's drinking. But, and this is the truth, every one of 'em was drinking as much as Paul, but they just handled it better. I remember one time I went to rehearsal with Paul and Melvin sent me out to get something from the trunk of his car. When I opened it up, there were liquor bottles everywhere."

Neither were they strangers to the seductions of the white powder. As Otis readily notes, "I was no saint when it came to drugs. My thing was primarily smoking a joint. What little cocaine I tried, I didn't like the way it made you feel. One time we were playing the Apollo and I'd snorted some a few hours before, and I was up so high I couldn't come down. We were singing 'My Girl,' doing moves we'd done a thousand times, moves I could do in my sleep, but I was either too late or too slow. I could hear the people in the audience snickering, like, 'What's up with Otis? He ain't in step.' I said to myself, 'No more of that shit. It ain't for me.'"

"We all did it. None of us were saints. It was common knowledge to anybody that knew us. Grass, coke, whatever. It wasn't just Ruffin. Wherever we went, people would be telling us, 'Hey, man, come and try some of this shit.' I'd say to the guys, 'You all can do what you want with that blow, but I'm going the other way.'"

The only rule was that you were not to take a drag or a snort in public. Don Foster recalls Otis several times catching a whiff of reefer wafting from the back of the bus and fining whoever the perpetrator was, Temptation or otherwise, \$250—a hefty bite, comparable to a week's salary for most of those on the tours.

"I didn't think that was fair to those people," says Foster, who insists he was not among that group. "But Otis knew what could happen. We were a bunch of black people in a bus, a lot of the time going through the South. If someone got caught with drugs, we would all go to jail. He could see the Temptations' career going right down the drain if that happened."

Yet precisely because there usually *was* a stash on board, just the pressures of making it in one piece down those miles of bad road might be enough to bend the rules when it was safe to do so. "There were times," Foster continues, "that we'd leave a redneck town, get off the bus, go into a field in the middle of the night, and everyone would light up the Mary Jane, to calm our nerves."

Hooked as he was on coke, Ruffin kept taking it up a notch, his fried sensibilities egging him on in a game of dare with the others, and especially Otis, whose authority he believed was far greater than his level of talent justified, and whom he now regarded as a nemesis.

To Genna Sapia, who could only study him from afar now, his over-the-top behavior was the next level of the classic Ruffin syndrome of trying to obliterate his scarred sense of self, but just making it worse. Insecure as he was to begin with, the coke, she said, “made him paranoid and belligerent.” While he kept his cocaine consumption in the shadows—“I never saw him doing it, he kept it away from the rest of us,” says Don Foster—the consequences became overt, such as when he began either showing up late or not at all for rehearsals, in too much of a daze to remember or care. No one could track him down, either; even if they knew where he was, he wouldn’t answer the phone or would leave it off the hook.

Finally, people began to confront him, if tentatively. Don Foster was one, though it was alien territory for him. “David was the first person in the company I ever knew was doing drugs. With the Supremes, you never had to worry about something like that. But then it came to my attention that a guy David was hanging around with was getting him cocaine. That’s why all those lackeys were such a problem. I told him, ‘Hey man, you’re fucking up your life and career.’ Or I’d try to put the pressure on him, tell him, ‘Hey, I got important people coming to the next show. Don’t go out and embarrass yourself like you did the last show,’ ’cause there were times when his performance suffered, he’d be out of sync or his voice not strong, though the audiences always went nuts over him.

“It didn’t matter what you said. He’d just cuss you out, say it ain’t your business, that he ain’t never embarrassed himself onstage. Again, the man believed he was invincible. He did the same thing when Otis and Melvin tried to talk to him about it. He never thought they’d do anything to him.”

Shelly Berger, who’d never seen the humble Ruffin of the early years, saw him only one way. “I think David dreamed of being a pimp. He loved that whole idea of walking in with a big bankroll, buying drinks for everybody, being the center of attention. The women, the flashy cars, the pinkie rings. That was his personality from the day I met him.”

It was exactly the sort of character model a man with a nonexistent sense of self-worth would crave. And no one knew better than Ruffin himself how little there was to him beyond the magnificent voice. Once, during a moment of weakness, Genna Sapia told him she missed him. Hearing this, she recalled, "He just gave me this strange, blank look for the longest time. I asked him what was wrong and he said he was trying to figure out what I could possibly miss about him."

That he felt at home in the pimp pose was all too obvious. With whatever bread he could scrounge, Ruffin draped himself in duds any pimp would covet, such as sequined, bell-bottomed silk pants, white boots, and suede and fur-lined vests. Even his massive trademark horn-rimmed glasses had tiny encrusted diamonds. At Tammi Terrell's pad, where the role was played out with brutal abandon, he kept two snarling, salivating Doberman pinschers named Bonnie and Clyde. And of course, there were the beatings of his "lady."

The last, which in real time was Motown's most horrific and shameful secret, seemed not to have been a part of the Ruffin-Terrell union until Terrell's career began to leaven, rising to and beyond the level of Ruffin's. That happened in 1967 after Kim Weston fled Motown with Mickey Stevenson. Because Weston and Marvin Gaye had teamed up on the 1966 duet "It Takes Two," a Top 20 pop and Top 5 R&B hit, Motown continued the concept with Terrell in Weston's stead, beginning a lava flow of hit singles like "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," "Your Precious Love," "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing," and "You're All I Need to Get By," as well as three albums.

Listening to her on these records, one could fall in love with Terrell for her soulful, sexy voice alone, which reflected the vulnerability and kittenish sensuality that led nearly all Motown men to pine for her. Her tiny frame, doe eyes, and the suggestive way she pursed her full lips perfectly embellished the image, only making her more of a sensation. Because the act—known informally but most commonly as Marvin and Tammi—took flight, she was by greater measures a far bigger star than Ruffin. Unlike him, she was known nationally, just the first name enough for immediate familiarity. If this led him to transfer some of his self-hatred onto her as she zoomed past him up the Motown totem pole, Tammi Terrell may have paid a heavy price for her sudden fame.

Ruffin's barbaric treatment of Terrell is not a subject many Motown survivors can comfortably dissect. In fact, Otis, in *Temptations*, took the easiest way out, avoiding it save for oblique, between-the-lines hints, writing with circumspection, "His thing with Tammi was intense and quite tumultuous. Later on, they began to fight a lot. Their relationship was definitely a rocky one. . . . Still, no matter what problems they had, one thing was certain: She loved David and I'm sure David loved her." He also made the sutured case that she was "very good for David," in that she didn't cater to his ego; for example, not letting him miss rehearsals if he was with her.

But what he didn't put in his book was what Tammi confided in him when David wasn't around. "One time we were talking and she kept saying, 'My head hurts.' I asked why and she just came out and told me that David had hit her in the head with a lamp. She went, 'Here, feel,' and put my hand up to the back of her head. I felt a big lump and just went, 'Wow.'"

"It's still something you think about, like, how could he hit a woman with a lamp? It's not like the rest of us were perfect husbands and boyfriends, but we didn't beat up on our women. My wife and me argued and shoved one another, but I'd never do what he did. You might get your nuts cut off for doing that. I don't want to sleep with one eye open."

Whether it was love or something else, the air always crackled with electricity when they were together. Joe Williams recalls when Paul invited David and Tammi to his home for dinner. They arrived—how else?—loudly, on Ruffin's motorcycle. Later, after drinking for hours, Ruffin, with Tammi on the back, fired up the bike, telling Joe to hold open the front door. "He was gonna ride up the stairway inside the house. He was dead serious, too, so I called Paul down and he came out blasting David, saying, 'If you ride that into my house I'm gonna kick your ass, David.'"

"He told Paul, 'Aw man, why you always got to act like you're everybody's daddy?' But he turned the bike around and went home, quietly. That may have been the only time anyone ever got him not to do something stupid. Good thing, too, 'cause he probably woulda killed himself and Tammi on those stairs."

But was this madness between them quite so one-sided, or was it more like mutually assured destruction? In truth, Ruffin and Terrell

went to great lengths to hurt each other. Both of them frequently took other lovers, each blaming the infidelity of the other for making them do it. One uncorroborated story told by Ruffin gofer Tony Turner is that after Tammi got wind of one of his affairs, "to spite him [she] went and jumped right into bed with Eddie Kendrick [*sic*]," which if true would show not just how far she could go to hurt him, but that in the twisted brotherhood of the Temptations Eddie could do the same to his best friend.

The physical and psychological warfare only got worse. Almost all through 1967 David and Tammi were playing bizarre public scenes. More than once, Tammi dangled herself over the ledge of her balcony after catching Ruffin in flagrante delicto, whereupon he would do his part by standing over her in his underwear, daring her to "go ahead and jump." Such moments provided perfect metaphoric fodder for two people living jointly on the edge of doom.

Genna Sapia, for her part, casts Terrell not as the sweetheart of the Motown rodeo but as "a promiscuous alcoholic," having convinced herself that Terrell was her rival for Ruffin's affections, even though he had actually left her for Sandra before leaving Sandra for Tammi. Her memoir of her endless "love" for Ruffin, even when he wasn't with her, bristles with alleged ghoulish Terrell plots against her in the mid- and late 1960s. Tammi, she insisted, had once dispensed "twenty dollars and a blow job" to secure a fake letter from a children's aid agency identifying not Ruffin as David Jr.'s father but a lesser-known Motown singer Sapia had been dating, Dennis Edwards, also one of Ruffin's Motown buddies. Trying to pack it in, Genna once attempted suicide by slicing her wrists with a razor; when that didn't work, she drank bottles of eyedrops, thinking the Merthiolate would do her in. It didn't, and when a friend found her on her floor and called Ruffin, his response, she says, was, "Why are you calling me? Call the police."

Yet she would still pine after him for most of the next twenty-five years, falling for him all over again each time he'd find his way back to her bed for a night, though he did the same with any number of women over that period. Sadly, however, his time with the one woman he may have genuinely loved, albeit by showing it in strange ways, was drawing to an end. On October 14, 1967, during an appearance with Marvin

Gaye at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, Terrell grew disoriented and collapsed. The startled Gaye carried her offstage and she was taken to a hospital where she was revived, but soon after was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor.

As she was convalescing in Detroit, the gravity of her condition was kept from the public, her parts on continuing Marvin and Tammi records taken by Valerie Simpson, who with Nik Ashford was writing many of them. During these horrible months, Ruffin tended to her. But unable to handle seeing her suffer and wail in pain as she began to wither away, he was relieved to be out on the road with the Temptations as much as they were. He began speaking of her less and less and all but stopped calling her from the road. Even as she was inexorably slipping closer to death, he showily carried on with a clutch of new women. One was Dean Martin's daughter, Barbara "Gail" Martin, herself a fledgling singer. In short order, he was unashamedly saying she was his "girlfriend," no matter that such gossip got back to Tammi. For all who inquired about what had happened between him and Tammi, he would tartly say they were "broken up." Proving it, when he came home he would quickly set off for L.A. to be with Barbara.

Terrell was still to endure more operations, eight in all, and torturous bouts of chemotherapy, and the cumulative effects would leave her with no memory and partially paralyzed. But by the summer of 1968, Ruffin had no time for the woman whom he had sworn he loved and whose life he had turned inside out for two hellish years. In his own diseased mind, Tammi Terrell was already six feet under.

I'll Be in Trouble

David Ruffin's impending Waterloo tracked along a path that portended a change of course at Motown, for both the company itself and its top male act. For the former, such a rechartering had long been on Gordy's agenda. He had already purchased a suitable mansion in L.A. for his now escalating trips to the coast, and by 1967 was spending only about a third of his time in a decaying Detroit he barely recognized from the vibrant street reveries of his youth. Indeed, he was nowhere near it when in late July of that year the air in town reeked of the acrid stench of doom as the worst urban race riot of the decade unfolded with grim results.

That paroxysm had been building for years, as racial tensions between the now nearly totally black populace and the city's nearly all white police went from a simmer to a furious boil.

Not even significant gains by blacks in city government and the emergence of a comfortable black middle class could stem a continued deterioration in living conditions for most residents, nor the growing crime rates that led to the police being set loose to harass and bust any black person on sight, with cause or not. Jails were filling up fast. Suddenly, Detroit was fodder for the doggerel of black militants. In early July, as the streets became a griddle, the Black Panthers' "justice

minister" H. Rap Brown hissed that unless things changed, "we're gonna burn you down."

The vow was fulfilled, though the "you" was Detroit's own under-class. The spark came on July 23 when, down on 12th Street, cops raided an after-hours joint—the kind of "preventive" action that had become common—arresting eighty-two blacks. As they were herded into paddy wagons, crowds outside the club turned violent, vandalizing stores, looting, and setting fires that spread all across the city. Two days later, the National Guard and 82nd Airborne were sent in to enforce a curfew, but roving gangs continued to "burn, baby, burn," somehow trying to prove that blacks destroying their own community would help their cause. By day two, Detroit was on fire. Entire blocks went up in smoke—though, curiously, Motown was left unscathed. Because neighboring buildings on West Grand Boulevard were torched, this gave rise to the probably fanciful notion that the rioters had consciously let it stand out of abiding respect for Gordy and his music. Not knowing they'd be given any such pass or luck, the musicians who were in Studio A the first morning of the riots heard gunshots on the street and scrambled out, running for their lives, some with guns drawn.

The Temptations were in town during the conflagration, and took cover in their homes. Otis—who had just taken up with, and would soon marry, a secretary for a booking agency named Ann Cain, a former girlfriend of Clarence Paul—happened to be on 12th Street, in the Chit Chat Lounge, when the riots erupted only blocks away. "Someone told me, 'Go home, Otis, all hell's gonna break loose,'" he recalls. "I got home just in time to hear the tanks rolling down the street outside, and fifty-caliber machine guns shooting off rounds. Man, I'd never heard that kind of firepower before, and I just dove for the floor, 'cause they were spraying them bullets, man.

"Next day, there were soldiers on every corner, and the cleaners where we got our uniforms cleaned was all shot up and looted, rioters took whatever they could. Somewhere out there were dudes who'd be wearing the Temptations' clothes. Melvin lived on the first floor of my house at the time, and neither of us came outside for three days. I tried, once, but when the soldiers saw me, they stared at me through their rifle lenses. They coulda taken me out and no questions would've been asked."

After five days, order was restored and the flames doused, leaving forty-three people dead, nearly twelve hundred injured, and seven thousand arrested—the huge majority black. In the wake of the riot, President Johnson did what politicians do in times of high stress: he formed a blue-ribbon panel, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which when it issued its report a year later confirmed the obvious—the United States was “moving toward two separate societies, one Black, one white—separate and unequal,” which could only be bridged by massive federal aid to education, housing, and employment. In Detroit at least, they’d have to wait a long time for any alms. Many are still waiting.

Gordy was not interested in rehabilitation or restoration. He had been, fortuitously, out in Las Vegas during the riots, along with most of the Motown brass, cheering on his beloved Supremes as they made another important mainstream engagement, at the Frontier Hotel. It was not a totally pleasant trip for Gordy, however. He fired the increasingly erratic and overweight Florence Ballard between shows on the first night, etching a point of order to any Motown employee who doubted that no individual in a Motown act was bigger than the act itself, with the implicit exception of Diana Ross. It was a lesson soon to be absorbed by a member of Motown’s second biggest act.

When he returned to Detroit, Gordy, surveying the smoldering ruins on his way from the airport, convinced himself that Motown, spared or not, was in mortal danger. He immediately moved the company’s business operations to a thick concrete ten-story office tower on Woodward Avenue called the Donovan Building and began selling off the other Motown properties on West Grand, keeping only 2648, where he’d invested so much money in the now state-of-the-art basement studio. That, he knew, was where all of Motown’s magic was made—not to mention all his money—and he wasn’t about to mess with it, at least for now. But as the smoke cleared and business got back to usual, everyone knew the dirty lowdown: Motown’s days in the Motor City that had given it life and a name were numbered.

The Temptations’ own transition was already under way, given that Motown had begun to turn them away from being an R&B act. Shelly Berger, who had opened a trough of opportunity and big money for

the Supremes by practically bleaching *their* musical roots, now was steering the Tempts along those same pathways. Shaken as the group was after the riots, it was almost as if none of that had even happened only weeks later when they flew to New York to play the Copacabana nightclub. The now declining mecca of swinging mainstream cool had not opened its doors to a black “rock” act until its owner, the crusty, cigar-chewing Jules Podell, had agreed to let the Supremes appear there in July 1965—paying them all of \$3,000 for three shows a night over three weeks and giving Gordy not so much as a drink on the house. Gordy, correctly, called it a “slave contract,” though one he eagerly grabbed, because of the upside of Motown getting its foot in such an important door.

By the time the Tempts came through that door, Berger, who had a long-standing friendship with Podell, had parlayed the Supremes’ successful Copa debut into a windfall deal that brought them back annually, by 1969 to the tune of \$17,500 for the engagement—more than even Sinatra or Sammy Davis Jr. He pocketed another dividend when the Temptations won their own annual deal, starting with that summer of 1967, when they were paid a cool ten grand for their three-week stand. Similarly, when producers at *The Ed Sullivan Show* begged for the Supremes, Berger told them they could have the girls on a regular basis—which turned out to be twenty appearances through the decade—only if the Temptations could come on twice a year, six times in all from 1967 through 1970, not that doing that highest-profile of shows ever got any easier. Each time, Otis says, “I’d damn near break into hives.”

If all of rock turned to contemplate the oracles of *Sgt. Pepper*, Monterey, and the Summer of Love, Motown wasn’t much interested—not one of its roster had a place, nor did Gordy seek any, on the stages of Monterey, at which Otis Redding and Jimi Hendrix became the new faces and sounds of soul, blended into sweatier, earthier folds of funk and rock. At Hitsville, Gordy was warily trying to keep up with the times by putting out some harder-edged pop-soul, but his meat now was squaresville. When the Temptations hit the stage at the Copa, and then at the big hotels and casinos, their sets began shunting their hits into neat little medleys, while the bulk tripped down Tin Pan Alley.

When he first arrived at Motown, Berger noticed that nearly all calls concerning the Supremes were from white promoters; conversely,

nearly all for the Temptations were from black promoters. By 1968, given ascension by the Copa, the Tempts had crossed over into the same territory. Indeed, black promoters found little at Motown that now interested them. Berger cared not a whit about a possible drop-off in the black market, for the Supremes or the Temptations. When he first ran the idea past the latter about doing an album of Broadway standards, he remembers, "Paul especially was very concerned because he felt the fan base would be upset. I told him, 'Paul, they not only will not be upset, they'll love it.' Because whatever the Temptations sing is going to be soulful, and it's going to open soul music to a tremendous range of material. I don't know if Paul bought that, but whatever concerns he or the others had, they just went all out with it. Those guys were incapable of not breaking a song down to its most appealing and emotional elements."

The album of standards, released in November 1967 as *The Temptations in a Mellow Mood*, was recorded at Motown's L.A. studio and produced by its top West Coast producers, Frank Wilson and Jeffrey Bowen. And while it certainly was nothing that could be confused with Norman Whitfield's mainline work with the group, they cut no corners or energy giving voice to lounge-lizard fodder, some of which had been unveiled at the Copa. They flew into the likes of "Ol' Man River," "Hello Young Lovers," "What Now My Love," "Who Can I Turn To," "Somewhere," and "That's Life," injecting each with a hint of gravelly soul within an overall sheen of smooth, tight five-part harmonies. They also passed around the leads, with David fronting only two tracks, Eddie three, Paul three. Melvin got one, and Otis a duet with Paul on the soon-to-be much-covered (most successfully by Stevie Wonder) soft-pop standard "For Once in My Life." Paul, in fact, would not reprise his objections to the Temptations' mellowing. Where before he had considered "Don't Look Back" as his signature song, now it became his booming version of "For Once in My Life."

The new course of the Temptations could be gleaned by the juxtaposition of their last two albums—*Mellow Mood* having been preceded by *The Temptations with a Lot o' Soul*, which was released in July 1967 to coincide with the Copa run and featured "(I Know) I'm Losing You" and "All I Need." Not surprisingly, *Soul* scored big—No. 7 pop, No. 1 R&B. But unexpectedly, *Mellow Mood* did nearly as well, No. 13 pop,

No. 1 R&B, indelibly proving that, as Berger had foreseen, whatever they sang had a lot o' soul.

Not that all the Temptations were completely sanguine about the detour to the middle of the road. In J. Randy Taraborrelli's 1986 anthology *Motown: Hot Wax, City Cool & Solid Gold*, Melvin Franklin maintained that they shared no common ground with the object of Gordy's big plans and his affections.

"By design," Franklin said, "Motown was not giving us the certain impetus to push us all the way over, like they did Diana Ross. I feel like that, and if anyone don't like it, I *still* feel like that." As a result, he added, a tad contradictorily, "[We] wanted to leave Motown back when we first played the Copacabana." It didn't happen, at least then, because of the uncertainties with Ruffin, and because, as Franklin had to admit, the only thing that made it at all comfortable was the fact that they were making money.

In fact, in 1968 each Temptation for the first time made over a million dollars. Even here, though, Otis feels that Motown, which of course made all financial decisions and paid taxes for all of its talent, was far too conservative and, as he puts it, "out of their depth" in the area of money management. "About the only good thing about Motown's accounting," he says, echoing Berger, "was that none of us ever had trouble with the IRS."

Eddie, too, had gotten too fat in the wallet to act on *his* long-standing gripes, though, backing up Franklin's words, he told Taraborrelli, "I decided to leave in 1967," since "I was never a part of the Motown family anyway. I never got on the mailing list at Motown, there was no relationship as far as I was concerned. The company had certain people that it liked, and that was that."

Yet neither Eddie nor Melvin went to Otis with these complaints. For one thing, there was all that bread. For another, Otis was quite satisfied with the way things were going—as was, ironically, Ruffin—and he could always sway Melvin on big group issues, and was able to at least pacify Eddie, who ceded a lot of ground to him by not getting involved in such matters.

And so, inner rumbling and grumbling aside, they pushed on, gaining tremendous altitude in the process. In the early spring of 1968 they cut their next album, *The Temptations Wish It Would Rain*, which became another winner; fueled by "I Wish It Would Rain" and its

equally dirgelike follow-up, also cowritten by Whitfield, Barrett Strong, and Roger Penzabene, "I Could Never Love Another (After Loving You)," which rose to No. 13 pop and No. 1 R&B, the same exact rankings realized by *Rain* on the album charts. (The song, sadly, became a requiem for Penzabene, whose self-torture about his wife's infidelity not only yielded two superb songs but his own suicide on New Year's Eve 1967.)

Indeed, few on the outside could have anticipated that there was anything amiss with the group. Nevertheless, when the Temptations did *The Ed Sullivan Show* on November 19, 1967—in a Motown two-fer, sharing the stage with the Supremes, with whom they performed duets of several of each group's hits, as well as "Hello Young Lovers" and "Don't Look Back" by themselves—it would be the last time the world at large would see intact the lineup that had achieved so much.

To be sure, the first half of 1968 was an ordeal in general, beyond the nasty business brewing with Ruffin. In March, after a gig at the University of Delaware, the other Tempts having already gone their separate ways, Otis and Eddie got into the group's touring Cadillac and directed their driver, John O'Den, to head for Cleveland, as Otis recalls, "to party and see some young ladies we knew." They were going seventy miles an hour on the Pennsylvania Turnpike when an eighteen-wheeler came speeding from the other direction. O'Den swerved violently but couldn't avoid crashing into it, leaving the Caddy a twisted pile of metal. Miraculously, they all walked away from the wreck with bumps and bruises. The next day, Otis watched from his hospital bed as Walter Cronkite reported the story on the nightly news.

On a broader level, there was the ripening social turmoil that had nearly burned Detroit to the ground. On April 4, 1968, it took another apocalyptic turn when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot dead on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. When the shots rang out, the Temptations were in Baltimore, about to go onstage. "Nobody had any idea anything had happened until, just before we went on, an announcement was made that Dr. King had been killed," recalls Otis. "There were gasps and crying, then a hush, like everyone was numb. And we were freaked out because when we'd play Memphis, we stayed at the Lorraine, just feet from where Dr. King was gunned down.

"We didn't know if we should go on. We really didn't want to, but seventeen thousand people had turned out to see us, so we went on, but we just went through the motions, our minds were elsewhere. But we still made those people happy, took their minds off the situation, maybe cooled emotions down a bit. Later, I read how James Brown had been onstage that same night in Boston and how he was given credit for keeping things cool there. We got less attention but I feel we did that in Baltimore too.

"When Bobby Kennedy got killed and Vietnam was tearing the country apart, we worried that our songs weren't relevant anymore, that they were too, you know, quaint. But like in Baltimore, we'd do 'My Girl' and 'The Way You Do the Things You Do' and people lost themselves in them, like they were an escape."

Moments like those papered over the reality that they too were being torn apart, by Ruffin's insubordination. Yet they tenaciously, and irrationally, clung to the chimera that he would somehow come back down to earth. It wasn't that they detested him any less, even Eddie, or that they would try overly hard to get him off coke and get him some psychological help. It was all about preservation, and staying on the gravy train. In their own way, Otis, Melvin, Eddie, and Paul were as parsimonious as David. All of them were looking out for number one—something they might not see again on the charts if they let Ruffin go. This of course fed into David's ego, and cut him the room to act on it as he wished, be it missing a show, rehearsal, recording session, or group skull session.

Gordy, knowing how gut-gnawing the decision was for the Temptations to make, kept an uncharacteristic—given how he had engineered Florence Ballard's termination—hands-off posture. Although he had a large stake in the group's ability to carry on as a top-tier act, he was nowhere near as committed to them as he was to the Supremes. Besides, in the sexist churn of Motown, Gordy let the men go about handling their own affairs, while calling every shot for the girls. Thus he left it to Shelly Berger and the company lawyers to hash out a letter of termination for Ruffin. Still, according to Don Foster, Gordy let it be known where he stood.

"Actually, Berry was the one who convinced Eddie and Paul to make the change," the longtime road manager says. "I think Otis's mind was made up, and Melvin always backed up Otis. But the other two

guys were waffling about it, one day they wanted him gone, the next they didn't. And Berry was telling them that the opposite was true of what they feared—that the Temptations would never survive *with* David, that he'd kill the act. He'd tell them, 'Do you wanna be like the Supremes? Well, you ain't gonna have that with David.' One time he said—and I remember this so well because he was right—he said, 'He's holding you hostage.'"

The end of the line for Ruffin came in Cleveland on June 22, 1968, during a ten-day engagement at the Versailles Hotel, at which Ruffin partied hard with his new girlfriend, Barbara Martin.

"They had two shows left," Foster recalls, "and when he was late on Saturday the guys sent me to his hotel to get him. But he was gone. We found out he'd left with Dean Martin's daughter, they'd gone to Buffalo where she was singing in some club. He never told us, he just thought he'd make it back in time for our next show, but there was a big storm and he got stuck there. Everybody was furious and they went on that night as four. Then in the middle of the show David got there and came onstage, and of course he got a big ovation, and he loved that. He would love to come on late and bask in the applause while the others stood there, steaming.

"Well, this time it was just too much—it was like he was getting an ovation for being irresponsible. He thought it was funny, but that ripped it. When they finished the show, Otis called Gordy and told him, 'We're gonna fire David.' They set up a meeting at Motown when they got back. They didn't wanna tell him he was out till then because they didn't want to be swayed, charmed by David, which he was very good at. They wanted the papers to be drawn up, signed, and ready to shove at him."

Otis, who says Ruffin absconded not to Buffalo but to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to catch Barbara Martin sing at the Latin Casino, remembers the unfolding drama with a wince.

"When David didn't show up," he recalls, "we looked at each other and said, 'We gotta let him go.' All four of us that night said that. And I want to make that clear. Because for the longest time, I caught flak as the guy who fired David Ruffin, and that led to where whenever something would happen concerning the Temptations, I'd hear, 'Otis did it.'"

That was very unfair to me. I always did what needed to be done. I had to. But all four of us decided to let David go. I did have to be the one who sent the word out. I called Don Foster and he called Motown to get the lawyers to do the paperwork, a release. The four of us had to sign it, so a meeting was set up at Motown after we got back.”

Cornelius Grant, knowing what was coming, gave David one last shot to save his behind. “The only time I ever had a serious talk with David was when they were going to dismiss him and he didn’t know yet, because they were gonna wait till they had that meeting at Motown,” he says. “I just felt like he could still prevent it, that it was such a tragedy. I didn’t tell him what I knew but I suggested to him that he should go to them and apologize for missing that show. And of course he got very upset with me for that, for not taking his side—which was basically that he was bigger than they were. He didn’t want to listen and walked away, and that was the end of that.”

The meeting was held on June 27 in Gordy’s office. David, naturally, was late, and by the time he waltzed in the termination papers were signed. When they were handed to him, with a brief preamble by Shelly Berger that “we’ve all decided to make a change,” Ruffin was caught between shifting emotions and attitudes. “He went from laughing like it was a joke, then being pissed off, then saying we were crazy, then asking for another chance,” Otis recalls with a shudder. “Then he just smiled and said good luck, all polite, and walked out trying not to show he was upset.”

It was the faux serenity of a man torn between his ego and his insecurities. And in the room there was no dearth of sympathy, guilt, and pity. To this day, Otis will say, “David Ruffin wasn’t a monster, he wasn’t evil. I think he was like a scared little boy a lot of the time and fell under the influence of truly evil people, leeches who fed on him. That was the easy thing for him to do. It would’ve taken a lot more work to get himself together, so he took a pass on that. The thing is, when he was cussing us out, I think he was really cursing himself, for fucking it all up so bad. For all his craziness, David knew he was out of control, he just couldn’t admit it to himself.”

To Don Foster, who also attended the meeting, it was “a weird scene in there. A lot of what he said wasn’t David talking, it was the blow talking. But whatever it was, none of us expected him to be sorry, which he said he was. And I could see—and he could see—that Eddie

and Paul were still waffling, because they were concerned that without David they didn't have a group. But Otis and Melvin took a strong stand and convinced them to go along.

"It was a sad thing to watch. And underneath it all for them was the uncertainty of their own future. After David left, we just sat there, limp, not saying anything for a while. That's how drained everybody was. Us, Berry, the lawyers, everybody. It was like a relative dying, one that you may not have liked, but who you still loved."

At least right away, Ruffin, for all of his tantrums about being axed, seemed prepared to get on with his own future, even playing good soldier for the group. In fact, he himself informed his replacement, having been privy to Otis's soft spot for Dennis Edwards, the erstwhile Contour who was such a fan of David and had worked so hard to become his friend, that his recent romance with Sandra Ruffin was actually undertaken only after David himself gave permission for Dennis to move in on her. Indeed, had Ruffin not come to him personally with the news he was in the group, Edwards might not have accepted, out of guilt that he was backstabbing him.

"David was my man, I idolized him," Edwards gushes even now. "Way back when, before he was with the Temptations and I was just a kid playing piano on sessions to stay around Motown, I would go see him sing at a club called Maull's Lounge. As great as he was with the Temptations, that was nothing compared to those days. That man was *incredible*. The things he did onstage. He'd climb the walls and hang off the lights. You'd rub your eyes because you couldn't believe it.

"So I'd just want to be near him, and we became very close. He'd drop by sometimes, and that's what he did that night, or morning, 'cause it was like 3 A.M. I opened the door and he said he was leaving the group—that's how he put it, he didn't go into details or nothin'—and that I was gonna be hired to replace him. I'm standing there half asleep and here's the guy I idolized laying this on me, and I'm like, what the hell? My head was swimming, then in the morning [Motown lawyer] Ralph Seltzer called and confirmed it. And my reaction was, 'Well, I don't know . . .'

"Sure, who wouldn't want to be a Temptation? But I was thinking, hey, if I didn't live up to that level, I wouldn't want to be the one to

bring them down. They had such a following, and it was so good with David. I mean, I thought I could sing anything, but I hadn't done much dancing. Would I make a fool of myself and embarrass them? It seemed like such a stretch for me."

But not for Otis, who a few weeks before when he and Eddie, in the process of sizing up potential replacements, went to check out Edwards, who had formed a new Motown singing group called the Firebirds, at the Howard Theater in D.C. It seemed almost providential that, like Eddie and Paul, Edwards hailed from Birmingham, was the son of another of those country preachers, and had moved to Detroit as a teenager. He was also requisitely tall, lean, and handsome, with a fetching smile and a low hairline that accentuated a wide, jarheaded Afro. Vocally, his tenor had a gospel burr and a sandpapery timbre, much like Ruffin but more buoyant and melodic, less commanding but also less exhausting. By turns, he could turn it up to loud and histrionic levels or peel back to a trembling murmur, and if he couldn't rise to Ruffin's virtuoso peaks, he was mellower, never grating on the ears. He was, Otis says, "a showman with a real command of the audience."

The two Tempts left the theater that night sold on him. "That brother can sing," was Otis's verdict, a quality that was buttressed by the fact that they knew the "brother" to be a sunny, deferential, well-mannered fellow, the diametric opposite of Ruffin. Properly humbled by the chance to sing with a group he had greatly admired for years, when Edwards joined he had no pretensions of being on the plane of the man he replaced.

"I could never be another David Ruffin," he still will tell you. "There's only one like that born each century. And they didn't want me to be another Ruffin, just someone to help take them down a new road. But whatever they wanted me to do, I was scared to death. 'Cause they were so good. I don't really think they knew how good they were, how natural. They knew just what to do to make the songs even better onstage. The first time I went on with them, I was nowhere near ready. We'd rehearsed a few things, but the first number we did, they left me in the dust. It was definitely on-the-job training."

There can be no underestimating how critical Edwards was to the survival of the Temptations. Yet from the start, he was walking on eggshells, doing anything asked of him, and he had no trouble getting with the program of reduced expectations for his function in the group.

A good-natured, talkative guy, he would hold his tongue in interviews, allowing Otis to do nearly all the talking—a role Eddie, Melvin, and Paul, none of whom were overly glib or comfy with self-promotion, let Otis have even though it created the weird dynamic of a man whose voice was hardly ever heard on their songs being their *public* voice, and implicitly their boss. Dennis, for his part, would murmur that he was not there to replace Ruffin but rather to be a new Temptation.

Dennis's being quiet as a mouse allowed the group some slack; if he washed out, they could still hire someone else. However, his strong pipes and quick learning of the routines was a most pleasant surprise. When Edwards took Ruffin's leads—an ungodly challenge, to be sure—his voice mimicked Ruffin enough to please casual fans who might not even have known Ruffin by name. But Edwards also gave the group a different signature. He could belt it out with the best of them, yet he was a little more melodic, a little less hard-core R&B—though to some, after Ruffin the group sounded somewhat slick and at times too anodyne.

The Tempts' plan was to counterbalance Ruffin's loss by boosting the "other" voices; thus it worked nicely that Edwards didn't drain everyone else's air, as David had. For Dennis, though, such considerations were not in his purview. Merely overcoming panic was his main goal.

"It was sink or swim, in the deep end," he says.

Because of their backlog of concert dates that had been booked before Ruffin's firing, Norman Whitfield had to wait until October to get Edwards into the studio, giving him more time to assimilate. As a stopgap, Motown on July 16 released a tepid, year-old Whitfield-Barrett Strong ballad intended as fodder on the *Wish It Would Rain* album, "Please Return Your Love to Me," featuring Eddie on lead. For the B-side, Whitfield called the four Temptations in only days after Ruffin was given his walking papers and cut "How Can I Forget," with Paul getting a rare lead. (Marvin Gaye would cover the song two years later.) That the Tempts' brand was so strong was proven by the underwhelming record going to No. 26 pop, No. 4 R&B.

Out on the road, meanwhile, word spread fast that Ruffin was out and the unknown Edwards in, and promoters who fretted that some fans would return tickets were assured when almost no one did, either

because, as Otis always said, no one *was* bigger than the group, or simply out of curiosity about the change. What's more, new bookings went on apace. Still, not everyone in those houses was so supportive. At some stops, cries of "Where's David?" rang out from the crowd.

The real trial for Edwards, and the group, came on July 9, 1968, at a show in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, a gig promoted as his "official" debut. By now, he had gained confidence and the confidence of the other Tempts. The act reflected the post-Ruffin sensibility. For the last few years, one of their trademark props had been a microphone stand with four built-in microphones so as to allow the "backup" Temptations more free movement. Useful as it was, it had also created the image that with Ruffin they had been less a quintet than one plus four—not incidentally, Ruffin had designed the contraption. But now the stand was out.

But was Ruffin? Motown, in its press releases, had played it cute about him, saying exactly what Ruffin had told Edwards, that he had "left the group," without any further explanation or even whether he would be back at some point. If this was a sop to David, it was also a stimulus for him not to go away quietly. At Valley Forge, this became clear when Don Foster, standing in an aisle in front of the circular, revolving stage, saw a cobralike figure coming down the aisle, headed straight for the stage. When he stepped in his way, Foster saw the man's face illuminated by the stage lights.

"David!" he said. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The answer came in the form of hard openhanded slap across his face, the sound of which was drowned out by the music and crowd noise. Thrown back on his heels, Foster could not stop Ruffin from bounding in one long stride onto the stage, just as Edwards was breaking into the lead vocal of "Ain't Too Proud to Beg." He had just finished singing, "I *know* you wanna leave me," when Ruffin took the microphone from his hand and completed the refrain: "But I refuse to let you go."

For a split second, no one knew quite what to do. The Temptations shuffled on, tried to act nonchalantly. Foster began frantically calling security. Then, as the audience recognized the shadowy figure as David Ruffin, a festive mood grew in the hall. What no one knew was that Ruffin had bought his way into the arena and laid low until he could choose the moment he would make a grand entrance—or *re*-entrance, since that was what it appeared to be. Indeed, after Ruffin had stolen

the microphone, Edwards pretty much ceased to exist. Awkwardly, he floated over to the other Tempts and tried to blend in with them on the background vocals, albeit with no microphone to sing into. Otis, Melvin, Paul, and Eddie didn't blink, but did glance at each other with a collective "what do we do now?" look—though Eddie, who had begun voicing the idea that Ruffin should be taken back, was unable to stifle a grin, as if greatly enjoying the manic moment as much as the crowd did, judging by all the howling and whooping during the song.

Ruffin had pulled it off so deftly, so quickly and fluently, that it sure did seem to demonstrate that he was *still* a Temptation, that he really had just taken a sabbatical until he was ready to resume his famous role. This notion was reinforced by Edwards not fighting to hold on to his microphone. In fact, the recreation of this scene in the 1998 *Temptations* miniseries, which shows him being forcibly stripped of the mike and then stalking around the stage, humiliated and wearing a scowl, is perfect nonsense.

"That's not the way it was," Edwards insists. "David didn't need to rip the microphone from my hands—I *gave* it to him. I wasn't upset, I was *happy* he was there. My dream was always to sing with David Ruffin, and that night I did." He laughs. "Even if no one could hear me."

Neither were the other Tempts particularly aghast. Another piece of movie nonsense was that they chased after Ruffin when the song was done, wanting to tear him limb from limb. Or that Ruffin begged them to be reinstated before being carted off by security. In reality Ruffin left the building on his own as the show continued. The entire episode was that quick—almost as quick as the way Otis dealt with it in his memoir, calling it "a stunt."

Today, he goes on, "Yeah, we took a little dramatic license to make [the movie] flow. David was just trying to get back in the group and that was his way of proving his point, because of the crowd reaction. It was just so David, so crazy. It was funny in a way."

Don Foster wasn't laughing. After the show, there were red welts in the shape of Ruffin's fingers branded on his face. When he came back-stage, he was steaming. "If he ever puts his hand on me again, I'm gonna kill him!" he told Otis.

Foster is no less adamant today, saying, "I would have killed him, too, if he tried slapping me again. It was at the point where I was gonna

get him taken care of by the Mafia folks who hung out at the Copa." If Foster is only semi-serious about that, very serious indeed was the Ruffin situation. "I knew that wasn't a one-shot deal," he goes on, "that he'd do it again, because David was a junkie in many ways, a drug junkie but also an attention junkie. What he'd gotten at Valley Forge was like a fix, and he'd be back for more."

He was right. Ruffin repeated his "guest" pop-in/pop-out appearances at three other Temptations shows over the following month, and even though Foster put local security on notice to be on the lookout for him at every venue, David, as stealthily as a commando, outfoxed everybody. It became something of a running subplot, with fans in each town craning their necks during the shows to see if they could see Ruffin either hiding or slithering through the aisles. He was so canny that he found ways to navigate around Foster and house security people, switching his entree from "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" to "My Girl" or other songs. Foster could only watch and do a slow burn as Ruffin sang his song and vanished. His only recourse, he determined, was not to sic security on him, as that would cause a furor among the fans, but to prevent him from getting to the stage, which would require additional security. Toward that end, he called Motown president Ewart Abner—Gordy had made himself chairman—and told him, "I need some help out here!"

As Foster explains, "David was desperate and blitzed on coke, and he had guns and his people had guns. I had to fear the worst."

Ewart's response was to send one bodyguard out to help. He would sit at the foot of the stage, facing the audience, eagle-eyeing the house like a Secret Service agent. Whether by coincidence or not, Ruffin kept away for several weeks. But he had one left in him—and to hear Edwards tell it, it did no less than cost him any chance of a rapprochement with the group, who Edwards says had an astonishing change of heart.

"What happened was, we had two shows in Gaithersburg [Maryland] and David was there for the first. He was in the audience, but he wasn't there to jump on the stage, though. I guess they'd come to some sort of agreement for him to come back. Afterward, they told me, 'Look, we know you been with us for a while but we're gonna take David back.' He was gonna make his comeback at the second show later that night.

"Well, I was just floored by that. Here I was just starting out with them, trying to fit in, and they hit me with that ton of bricks. But what could I do? If David was coming back, who was I? So I went back to the hotel and started packing. But then David did his usual shit and didn't show up for the second show, so they called me and said, 'Get down here right away.'"

"Then, during the show, David came up on the stage again. That was the end of it. They said after that, 'We're not gonna take him back ever again.' And he never came to another show. It was like a giant weight was lifted from our shoulders."

For his part, Otis maintains that they never offered Ruffin his old job back—Foster too says it didn't happen—which means that either Dennis misunderstood their intentions or that Otis would rather not admit that they actually knuckled under to Ruffin, only to be made fools of yet again. One may wonder why, if Edwards was right, Motown never put out word that Ruffin would be making his return in Gaithersburg, and the Temptations didn't bill the show as such. Of course, it's also possible that they intended to spring the news as an earth-shattering surprise.

Whatever the case, it mattered only that the new lineup was now set in stone, with no drop-off in their box-office appeal, pending their first recordings with Edwards. Most happily, there were no further pop-ins from Ruffin.

"I'll tell you when it all fell in place," Otis ventures. "When we went to L.A. to finish that tour with a date at the Forum. When Dennis came out that night [dramatically, following intermission], the crowd just went mad for him, and he took it to another level. Dennis was hungry to prove himself, and they loved him. I had chills running up my spine. It was like twenty thousand people, in one big voice, said, 'David who?' I really felt it. It was like a release for us, like we could let out a deep breath. Because we had worried that we might lose ground. But that was not gonna happen."

On that night in L.A. David Ruffin was out of sight, out of mind. For the Tempts and their legion of fans he was now, finally, past tense.

Doin' Fine on Cloud Nine

For all the messiness of the past year and the worries about the future, Ruffin's enforced departure was quite serendipitous for Norman Whitfield. He had been looking to update the Temptations' sound to bring it in line not with the now fading stripped-down soul of Stax/Volt but rather the more serrated, culturally reflective "acid soul" of Sly and the Family Stone and the Chambers Brothers. However, this desire was tempered by Gordy's knee-jerk timidity about delving into musical formats that might be "threatening" to those coveted white mainstream audiences. In the case of the Temptations, Whitfield was well aware that the lush R&B-pop he had perfected with them was adored by the upscale white demographic that the group was now almost exclusively playing for, and that any deviation from that "feel-good" soul, with its flashy moves and tremulous love songs, entailed risk. To even try, one would need to imagine some way that the Temptations could share a niche with the screeching guitars and barbed, primordial funk of Sly Stone.

If Gordy was loath to alter the formula he had going with the Temptations for something that could backfire with embarrassing

results, he was just as nervous about having Motown adapt to the political burble of “acid rock,” the compositions of which seemed to be either antiwar or pro-drug musical recruiting posters. Even before the procreative Summer of Love, only rarely had the troublesome outside world intruded. It took the teenage Stevie Wonder to put socially conscious content into and a gritty ghetto streetscape onto the cover of a Motown album, his 1966 *Down to Earth*, which included heavy fare like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “A Place in the Sun,” both of which became chart hits, as did the album. But little else profound would see daylight for the next two years.

Gordy’s concern about the war seemed limited to how it might affect the draft status of his male singers—and, curiously, few of them ever were drafted. This fueled speculation that he had a quid pro quo arrangement with the draft board, perhaps as a reward for having one of those singers, a member of a low-level group called the Mynah Birds who while in the Naval Reserve fled for Canada the day he was to ship out for Vietnam, turn himself in to the FBI. That singer, James Ambrose Johnson Jr., better known as Rick James—another of Melvin Franklin’s many “cousins”—would return after a year in the brig to hit pay dirt in the 1980s, with a little help from the Temptations.

None of the Tempts were drafted. “God was looking out for us,” Otis says, which might prompt Gordy to say, “You’re welcome.” But they felt as if they were going into a battle zone in late January 1968 when they were booked for a tour of Japan, just days after the U.S. Navy intelligence ship the USS *Pueblo* was boarded in the China Sea by the North Korean navy, who killed one American sailor and took the other eighty-two crewmen into custody, accused of spying and being in North Korea’s territorial waters. The Temptations feared they could be targets in Japan, and had Don Foster call Gordy to cancel the tour. His reaction was typical Gordy.

“Aw, go over,” he later told Otis. “You know those Oriental women, they love black guys. You guys will be able to get all the pussy you want.”

“Hey, we get enough of that here,” Otis said. “We ain’t got to go way over there for that. We ain’t going, and that’s that.”

That Gordy had to accede was proof that the Temptations had grown too big for him to order around anymore. And, truth be told, Gordy in the late 1960s was a lion of a fading era, a symbol of fading images of social and cultural relevance. For example, he could defend himself against escalating charges that he had “sold out” soul music

by flaunting his connections with an aging black political and social power elite, connections displayed when after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death he was invited by King Jr.'s widow, Coretta, to the funeral, and was named with Harry Belafonte to coproduce a memorial benefit in June for King's final cause, a mass procession on foot from Atlanta to D.C. For those rites, Gordy brought the Supremes, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Gladys Knight and the Pips, who all performed and then took a few symbolic steps northward, with Gordy, beside Diana Ross, at the front with Belafonte and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Balancing the equation, Gordy also sent the Temptations to the White House in June 1971 to sing at the wedding of Richard Nixon's daughter Tricia.

Still, as incongruous as it seemed to think of the Temptations going note for note with Sly Stone and Motown going toke for toke with Haight-Ashbury, from where Gordy sat, high in the Hollywood Hills, it was all too obvious that the weedy scene at the rock and roll emporiums on Sunset Boulevard had left Motown behind. He knew he needed to do something about that, and fast. And to his good fortune, literally, Whitfield was working on it.

But Gordy had other priorities as well. The biggest was to capitalize on the Hollywood phase of Motown's future. Shelly Berger, for whom getting major network TV exposure for the Supremes and Temptations was a mission, began working on the most ambitious of his conquests in the late spring of 1968, when he set out to make a deal in which Motown would coproduce with *Laugh-In* producers George Schlatter and Ed Friendly an hourlong NBC TV special starring both supergroups, who were now practically the only faces at Motown that mattered, each having conquered the white mainstream. Berger, who was managing both acts, could have more understandably pitched the Supremes, who were still miles ahead of the Tempts in sales and mass market appeal, but he astutely divined mutual benefit in the coalition: for the girls, street cred and a handful of their lost soul; for the guys, an hour to be seen in the white-hot spotlight that bathed the girls.

The project had been on the drawing board since what thereafter served as its virtual audition tape—the *Ed Sullivan* episode that

teamed the two acts, when the chemistry between the megagroups was obvious and natural. Recordings meant for a joint album had begun as early as January 1968. Of course, in the time afterward came just a wee change in the Temptations, one that necessitated that Berger make a demand from the network. As Otis notes, "After we let David go, we got an agreement that the show would go on. No one knew we would take off and we'd get even bigger."

In the name of company sanguinity, each group, said Berger, was paid \$15,000, just as they'd gotten \$7,500 apiece for the Sullivan gig. In both cases, the money was top-shelf for TV—but cheap by comparison with the bread they earned from big club dates and sales royalties. Berger relates that "they broke the glass ceiling for what a rock group was paid then for a TV show, but it wasn't about the money. It was about exposure to a bigger audience in one night than they'd play to, combined, the whole year. You'd trade your right arm for that. No network had ever given rock acts their own special, but the network was able to save a lot of money so it was an attractive property to them. The pleasant surprise was that nobody said, 'It would be better if we just did it with the Supremes.' One thing I found working for the Tempts was that everybody loved those guys. Network executives who hated rock and roll and might not have cared that much about the Supremes would say, 'Those are the guys we really want.'"

Gordy and Diana Ross would have other objectives—the *raison d'être* of the show was to showcase the soon-to-be-solo "Miss Ross," the sobriquet by which Gordy was now asking the mere mortals in her midst to address her. The problem she faced was that whenever the Supremes performed with the Temptations, her voice was a thin, wispy zephyr nearly sucked up by the bellows of Ruffin, then Edwards. Indeed, on that *Ed Sullivan Show*, unable to keep up with Ruffin in rehearsals, she ordered that all the songs be played in her key, forcing Ruffin to sing higher than he was used to, though he still humbled her. Ross's choice as a singing partner was Eddie, whose velvety vocal cords took less of a toll on her voice, and her nerves. Dennis, meanwhile, was for the most part a cipher, merely a Ruffin stand-in, since at the time of the alliance with the Supremes, "Cloud Nine" had not yet been recorded, and as powerful as his voice was, he held it in check during his duets with Diana, as did all the Tempts, who needed no tutorial about the order on the totem pole for these hookups—Ross first,

followed a good ways behind by the Supremes and, still further behind, the Temptations.

The show was, with self-conscious hip, called *TCB*, the 'hood-derived abbreviation for "taking care of business" (immortalized by Aretha Franklin in her 1967 megahit "Respect," when she combined both forms in the exhortation "Take care of TCB!"). The business being taken care of, however, seemed to be carpentry, as thousands of dollars were sunk into futuristic-looking sets, including one that looked like a flying saucer and rose ten feet above the stage where the orchestra would be situated. Fashion designers weren't far behind, however, with thousands more spent on lavish, rhinestone-spangled gowns for the girls and tuxedos for the guys.

Taping was scheduled in Hollywood for late August, with the broadcast to be aired on December 9. To prepare, both groups took to the road over the summer for a week at the Carousel Theater in Framingham, Massachusetts, polishing up songs for the show, before arriving in L.A., where a week of rehearsals would precede the taping of the show at NBC's Burbank studios on August 23. All told, for most everyone involved it would be ten days of living hell, and for the Temptations of abject humiliation as they were incorporated into Diana Ross's annoying shadow.

For one thing, even *they* were advised to call her "Miss Ross." As Otis says, "We had a hard time with that. We'd known Diana since she was a scared little girl. We had to assure her she wasn't a failure, to stick with it—and that was when we weren't having any hits either. Man, without Paul and Eddie, there wouldn't have ever *been* no Supremes!" Melvin, who knew Diana when they were both schoolkids, typically tried to take the sting out with humor, telling them, "From now on, call me Mr. Franklin."

Eddie, on the other hand, who'd had a brief fling with Ross a few years before, had no kick with her. Once, during a break, he was munching on some fast food when Diana swept by and joshed, "How'd *you* rate that?" She then gave him a playful slap on the cheek. Some who witnessed this vignette swore the slap was real, and as Mary Wilson wrote in *Dreamgirl*, the incident was proof that "Diana had gone too far," despite his coming to her defense. For Eddie, the gripe was with Gordy, whom he already nursed a grudge against for allegedly short-changing the Temptations. Seeing him and his mates made into basically

Diana Ross's backup singers on the show, he sulked the whole time, his trademark bashful smile turned into a taut grimace.

Of the fifteen numbers on the show, Ross was in nine, with a separate "introduction" in addition to that for her group. With the Supremes she sang seven songs and in medleys with the Tempts on several of their songs, melding with Dennis and Eddie on "The Way You Do the Things You Do." She was given an embarrassing solo number, "African Vogue," flouncing about in native African garb inventing some unidentified dance. She had more medleys with the Tempts on pop standards such as "Eleanor Rigby" and "Do You Know the Way to San Jose," and she and Paul did a duet on "Respect" and "The Impossible Dream." The Tempts, meanwhile, were allowed to sing only four of their own hits alone, with Dennis making his national debut as the new lead on "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" and "(I Know) I'm Losing You," while Paul sang out front on "Hello Young Lovers" and "For Once in My Life."

There was one joint number planned, sans Ross, with Wilson and Cindy Birdsong singing with Eddie, Otis, and Paul in a song-and-dance rendition of the bossa nova hit "Mas Que Nada." But after the number had been taped, to a stirring audience reaction, it was cut from the show, something they all attributed to Diana. After that the atmosphere grew toxic, with Mary Wilson saying years later that "the whole situation was a mess [that] seemed to get worse every day."

Somehow, they got it done, and with impressive results, leaving Otis to see the experience in a more philosophical light than Eddie could. "I think," he says, "a lot of the tension on that show was because there was so much pressure to do it, and get it done in ten days. And, really, that was when I began to notice that Paul was drinking too much, to cope with it. But to me, the pressure was all on Diana, because it was all about her. We were there as supporting players, so it didn't mean as much. Although I got to say it hurt that after the show was all done, Berry gave the Supremes these expensive gifts for doing such a great job, while we didn't even get a simple thank-you. But that's how it was. We just took the checks and moved on."

With Ruffin gone, Norman Whitfield certainly had an easier time ordaining the Temptations as the avatars of a Motown rebirth. Now the company's top-dog writer/producer, after Brian and Eddie Holland and

Lamont Dozier walked on Gordy to a deal tendered by Capitol Records to oversee their own label, called Invictus, Whitfield got the Tempts back in the studio for the first time with Edwards in October 1968. Norman and his now steady lyricist Barrett Strong had come up with anything but a “safe” song as the vehicle of the Tempts’ midcourse shift.

The stimulus for the song, all would agree, was Sly Stone’s debut hit, “Dance to the Music,” a Top 10 song in the spring of 1968 that had a far deeper effect on the R&B crowd for its primordial funk/dance jam of soul, jazz, and rock. And while Whitfield would be given credit for turning the Temptations on to the formula, they may have actually had to talk him into it. According to Melvin Franklin in *Motown: Hot Wax, City Cool & Solid Gold*, “Otis was the spearhead of that movement. He heard Sly and the Family Stone records and told Norman that the social comment thing was going to be important, and we needed to be in on it.”

As Otis tells it, he ran into Whitfield outside a local club called the Casino Royale three weeks before the session and suggested that the Temptations “do something like” what Sly was doing. Whitfield’s response, he says, was dismissive—“Man, I don’t need to be bothered with that shit. That ain’t nothin’ but a little passing fancy.” If so, he had a change of heart—or else was intentionally opaque, not wanting to let anyone else take credit for what he had in mind, which was to broaden his own pre-Sly funk dabbling with the prickly, twangy electric guitar accents on “All I Need” and “You’re My Everything.”

However he decided to proceed, the telltale funk was primarily in the guitar playing of a new studio musician, a white cat named Dennis Coffey, who’d played in a band called the Royaltones that had backed up Del Shannon. Having heard him play at the clubs around town, Whitfield had invited Coffey to join a new Motown operation, the Producers’ Workshop, where Motown producers often tried out new material before taking it into the studio. When Whitfield had the workshop take a crack at “Cloud Nine,” Coffey blew him away.

“He wanted to experiment with the groove,” Coffey recalled. “A drummer we had, a guy named Spider, came up with a double-time cymbal part that resulted in the kick-ass groove, and I came up with the pedal guitar effect in the intro and throughout the song. When the pedal was pressed, it produced a ‘wah-wah’ sound. The technique had been used by Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton [with Cream], but no one had used it or even heard of it in mainstream R&B.”

A day later, Coffey got a call from Motown to reproduce the sound at the “Cloud Nine” session, his first for the company, a gig he’d long pined for and that would endure for years after. (He had a Top 10 hit of his own, the funky instrumental “Scorpio,” in 1970.) As he did his turn, combining with James Jamerson’s bass in a wicked synergy, “it immediately became clear to me to me that I was playing with the finest rhythm section I’d ever heard.”

Next came the vocals, which the Temptations came in to do on October 1. When they heard the track and the funky arrangement, it sure sounded to Otis like a Sly Stone kind of feel. “Oh, so this is a passing fancy?” he twitted Whitfield. The obvious question, of course, was what the song was inferring by its title and its stark lyrical imagery about a guy who, having lived through childhood abuse and failure in a ghetto habitat, confessed, “The pressure came down hard / And I took to cloud nine . . . a million miles from reality . . . higher . . . up and away.” Upon which he could say, “I’m doing fine on cloud nine,” the song’s hook and theme.

Whitfield and Strong were playing with real fire, at a time when using “high” in a song was either bold or boldly stupid. A year before, when the Doors went on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, they’d been warned to change the now famous line from “Light My Fire,” “Girl, we couldn’t get much higher,” to “Girl, we couldn’t get much *better*,” a directive they ignored, earning them a subsequent ban from the show (not that they cared). Whitfield, like everyone else who sired a “drug” song (“Eight Miles High,” “Along Comes Mary,” “Strawberry Fields Forever,” for example) airily denied any such intentions. It was, he said, about desperation and escape from the dead end of the ghetto to higher—as in better, not stoned—ground. He sold Otis, who wanted no part of the drug culture and who even now says the song “is *not* about drugs. Norman didn’t do drugs. It’s about changing your attitude, internally, to see where a better life is.”

Of course, as he and Whitfield surely knew, if it *was* taken as a drug metonym—and it was—and grabbed the legions of young pot-heads and acidheads, well, that would hardly hurt their still burgeoning mainstream appeal. In fact, the song pulled off a neat double play, conjoining two deep social messages about drugs and ghetto gloom. Yet for the Tempts, who like Otis saw social comment mainly as a “thing,” a good gimmick, not a calling, the song sought to find a new jurisdiction

for their broad stripe, one compatible with the times. And so Whitfield smartly kept them anchored to the traditional R&B idiom that *they* owned, leaving them plenty of room to tailor their soul to funk.

Dennis, in his first turn on a Temptations record, would provide the overall persona of the song with a sneering narrative of a childhood that “wasn’t very pretty” back in the slums of the city. In retrospect, it was unlikely Ruffin could have handled it as credibly as Dennis did, taking the edge off the sore-throated prickliness with his breezy, lively ascent to that cloud of escape.

Edwards remembers, “Norman never said, ‘Sing it this way.’ He said, ‘Sing what you feel.’ So I really produced myself. And that’s basically how it was for every song we’d do. It was more or less organized chaos, for a long time. We’d start at like midnight, ’cause that’s when Norman liked to work, and stumble out of there at like six or seven A.M. But I think we gave him what he wanted—more than he wanted.”

Adds Otis, “It took a lot of work, but it came out sounding really nice. And Dennis, man, he just nailed it. I was so happy for him—for us.”

Everyone was splendid, even transcendent, so alike in cadence and nuance in their chain of vocal exchanges. In keeping with their new egalitarianism, though, they would trade selective parts of the lead, streaming in and out, for instance Eddie opening a phrase with “It’s a world of love and harmony,” rejoined by Dennis’s “You’re a million miles from reality.” In the end, “Cloud Nine” was a milestone, for the Temptations, for Motown, and for mainstream funk. The single, released on October 25 backed with “Why Did She Have to Leave Me (Why Did She Have to Go),” rocketed onto the charts. Gordy had made sure that the DJs would have no hedge playing it, and by February 1969 it reached No. 6 pop, No. 2 R&B. It would also garner, ludicrously for the belatedness of the award, Motown’s first Grammy as Best Group R&B Performance. (Black artists had not yet been allowed into the pop categories. Three years earlier, “My Girl” had been nominated but lost to James Brown’s “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag.”) “Cloud Nine” beat out, among others, Sam and Dave’s “I Thank You” and Archie Bell and the Drells’ “Tighten Up.” Whitfield, Strong, and the late Roger Penzabene were also nominated for Best R&B Song for “I Wish It Would Rain” but lost to Otis Redding for “Dock of the Bay.”

In the end, the “passing fancy” of Sly Stone-like psychedelic soul eased the Temptations to a second wind, one that would still be at their

backs four decades later. And in a roundabout irony, one of the song's postscripts was that Sly Stone could crib from *them* when in mid-1970 he came out with "I Want to Take You Higher."

By November, not only was "Cloud Nine" on a hard upward flight, but so was the album the group had made with the Supremes, with Ruffin's early vocals scrubbed for Edwards's. It was titled, with telling emphasis, *Diana Ross & the Supremes Join the Temptations*. The work had been produced not by Whitfield but in L.A. by Frank Wilson and a new Motown hand, Nikolas Ashford, who'd come to the company with his singing/songwriting partner, Valerie Simpson. None of its content was original, or given much thought. Rather, the tracks were covers, some of old Motown hits such as Smokey and the Miracles' "I'll Try Something New," Marvin and Tammi's "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," and Marvin's "Try It Baby." From outside Motown came Herb Alpert's "This Guy's in Love with You," Wilson Pickett's "Funky Broadway," and "The Impossible Dream."

However, the first single became "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me," originally a minor 1966 hit by Dee Dee Warwick—and, notably, an early work written by the future Philadelphia International honcho Kenny Gamble—that featured swelling horns, a soaring duet by Diana and Eddie, and a brief spoken soliloquy from Otis that went, "And for each beat of my heart / For every day we're apart / I'll hunger for every wasted hour." Released a month after "Cloud Nine," it surely ate into the former's profits in climbing to No. 2 pop and R&B early in the new year, paralleling the album's rise to No. 2 pop, No. 1 R&B.

Heading into December, then, Motown had a smash single by the Tempts, another by the Tempts-Supremes, and a smash Tempts-Supremes LP, not to mention the skyrocketing "Love Child," a massive hit for the Supremes. On December 2 came the release of the *TCB* soundtrack, a week before the show would air. When it did, it seemed like a dual coronation, granted that the only head Gordy really wanted fitted for a crown was Ross's. Clearly, the calculation to hitch the two groups paid off. *TCB* won its time slot in the ratings and was the top-rated variety show of 1968, and its echoes kept on spawning more hit records. The first, *TCB*, would run to the top of the pop and R&B album charts early in 1969, by which time there had also come a Temptations

Christmas single, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer/Silent Night," with Eddie on lead, and a *third* album, *Live at the Copa*, capturing their most recent visit to the club, the first with Dennis in tow.

Their prime-time reveries continued as well. They headlined the glitzy ABC Saturday night variety show *The Hollywood Palace* for the second time in a year. The first, on February 17, 1968, had been with Ruffin. On March 1, 1969, with barely a blink of the eye, Edwards was on board as they went about doing duets with host Bing Crosby. On July 10 they hosted their own syndicated TV special, *The Temptations Show*, then in December appeared on *The Leslie Uggams Show*.

The uncertainty about a post-Ruffin existence seemed a hundred years ago. Implicit was what Otis had told Ruffin, even when he didn't necessarily believe it: no Temptation was bigger than the group.

For his part, David had stopped obsessing about getting back with the Temptations and had gathered his courage for a solo career. The hitch for him was that he had been fired by the Temptations, not by Motown, which still owned his contract—the same individual artist's contract he'd signed in the early 1960s and never amended to technically make him a Temptation. He saw no sense in continuing on there, at the same royalty rate he had always considered petty and insulting. That he had managed to blow almost all his earnings, losing the mink-lined El Dorado and, later, a white Rolls-Royce and being left essentially broke and homeless, living on any given day at the home of whatever woman he could charm, was all Gordy's fault, he thought. Thus he flinched at the idea that Motown would still be taking its pound of flesh from whatever success he might have. It only compounded matters that he held Motown in contempt for not taking his side in the contretemps with the Temptations, believing that one word from Gordy would have saved his job. Moreover, he was sure Gordy would pay him scant attention now, and that he'd be shunted to low-level songs and producers. Besides, he believed Motown was finished as a big-time player in the music business.

About that, he was prescient. Motown indeed was in decline as a hit purveyor, and the 1970s would hold greater success for Motown expatriates like the Spinners and Gladys Knight and the Pips, and later still Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye, even Diana Ross. And so Ruffin

tried to follow Holland-Dozier-Holland out the door and create a new niche for himself. He formed a band he would front, called the Fellas. Then he hired a lawyer to file suit justifying his contract-jumping on grounds that Motown had held him in “indentured servitude” and “economic peonage” using a “one-sided contract” that was “appropriate only for a relationship between a guardian and a child or mental incompetent.” He also signed, flouting the ITMI purview, a deal with an outside management company, Associated Booking, run by New York agent C. B. Atkins, who assured him there was a bonanza waiting for him not just in records and club dates but in movies. Atkins pitched him to Roger Vadim for a role in *Barbarella*, the flick the director was making starring his wife, Jane Fonda, and for another part in a proposed movie about Muhammad Ali.

Atkins’s bravado excited David to no end, but there were no parts and no quick offers from any record labels, no surprise given the inordinate fear industry people had about crossing Gordy, a man around whom rumors of mob involvement swarmed like flies. Few artists ever walked on him unscathed, as Mary Wells and Brenda Holloway learned. Even those who were legally free to leave could face his wrath—witness Florence Ballard, who was putatively blackballed when she was signed in 1968 by ABC Records, only to have distributors not take her solo records, promoters not book her, and even her own label not promote her. As vindictive as Gordy could be, even Motown favorites could suffer. When a long-tabled Martha Reeves sought to leave Motown in the early 1970s, Gordy wouldn’t consent to it until she paid him \$200,000 in back “expenses.” And when Gladys Knight and the Pips sought greener pastures, they had to sue him for \$350,000 in unpaid royalties.

Whether Ruffin would have been hamstrung à la Flo Ballard or not, Atkins didn’t get the chance to find out, since Motown sued them both for breach of contract, charging—with logic that would have made more sense five years earlier—that “the entertainment business is full of promoters eager to divert talented artists from Motown.” For a time Ruffin fought in court after the suits were consolidated, alleging illegal restraint of trade, one manifestation being that, he said, Gordy had sabotaged bookings for the Fellas, before he came to see that Gordy held all the cards. The case was settled, with Ruffin staying at Motown—with the proviso that it produce and release at least one record a year by him.

Shelly Berger, still loyal to a fault about anything that relates to “Mr. Gordy,” as he calls him to this day, seems to have blanked out that there even was a legal response by Motown to Ruffin. “I don’t remember Motown suing David,” he says, “because it was clear he had a binding contract, signed in 1966 with ITMI, for four years. We didn’t need to sue him—we already had him. And the point is, he stayed.” Berger also paints Gordy as pained by such ingratitude from one of his flock.

“When this thing came up with David,” he says, “Mr. Gordy said, ‘What am I doing? I’m paying for this guy’s accountants and *I’m* being sued? For doing right by people?’ Knowing how David was, and how bad he was with money, [Gordy] paid for his accountants, and as bad as David’s situation was, he would have been in far worse shape without that.”

Of course, such Gordy benevolence was cold comfort for many in the stable, none of whom ever had access to their own financial data and accounts and relied solely on Gordy’s largesse. Otis, before he, Melvin, Paul, and Eddie retained their own accountants, wondered if Gordy’s overly conservative money handlers knew the first thing about matters like investments and tax shelters, since their 1099s had been enormous. Nevertheless, Ruffin didn’t know how good he’d had it, not only because Motown was saving him from outright bankruptcy, but because he was only a nominal Temptation he had not been dunned for the same “expenses” as the other four in the group. What’s more, it was fortunate that the Fellas never did get to perform, as it likely would have been disastrous.

In a 1979 anthology called *The Story of Motown* by Peter Benjaminson, the author quoted a “Motown agent” who had seen the Fellas rehearse in a Chicago club. He recalled that David had to continually stop in midsong because the background singers didn’t know the lyrics, nor did the musicians know the music. “They did not get through a single number,” he said. After Ruffin was compelled to stay at Motown, possibly to his relief, he resolved to run with it, with the recent past seemingly forgotten and the useful spin that, as he’d fibbed to Dennis the day he was fired, he had merely “left” the Tempts, as countless other lead singers do their groups, for solo stardom.

It may have seemed to some that he had not left at all, and that the seam between Ruffin and the group was nearly invisible. On January 21, 1969—right in the maw of “Cloud Nine,” “I’m Gonna Make You Love Me,” and the pair of Temptations-Supremes albums tearing up

the charts—came Ruffin's maiden single, "My Whole World Ended (The Moment You Left Me)." If it sounded familiar with its ear-grabbing horn and string arrangement and his harrowing vocal, it was not by accident. The song, its flute intro and melody based on the Mendelssohn classic "Frühlingslied" and produced with a Norman Whitfield groove by its main cowriters Harvey Fuqua and Johnny Bristol, had originally been reserved for the Tempts when Ruffin was with them. Now, getting life with him out front with the Motown quintet the Originals as background singers, it went Top 10 pop and No. 2 R&B, meaning that Ruffin could—and no doubt did—claim the inverse of Otis's postulate was the case: that he *had* to be bigger than the Temptations if he could take a Temptations song that far.

He felt so good about it that he wouldn't stick it to them, instead saying all the right things, such as telling the press, in the cracked tongue of Ruffin-speak, that while he missed the Temptations, "If you put on a new shoe and you wear it as long as you wore the old shoe you took off, I think you become comfortable."

To the public, it was as if they'd never taken off the old shoe that was David Ruffin. For the rest of 1969, tooth by jowl with the Temptations, he trod on, following up in May with his first LP, *My Whole World Ended*, from which came his second single, "I've Lost Everything I've Ever Loved," a confessional of a title if ever there was one for him. It, and the album, did well enough, hovering around the middle of the pop charts but going to the top on the R&B charts, stoking more recordings that led to a second album, *Feelin' Good* (originally titled *Doin' His Thing*) in November, and the collaborative LP with his brother Jimmy, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, in mid-1970, both of which also did well on the R&B turf, a niche Ruffin could ace in his sleep and that now seemed to be the best the "old" Temptations formula could do. If that posed a problem looking down the road, and if he still wasn't making the money he felt he deserved (and again blowing whatever bread Motown did save him), he was still a viable commodity, and comfortable with the succor of constant recording. In 1970, when he could have legally gotten as far away from Motown as he wanted, he quietly renewed his contract for another four years.

But if it seemed that David Ruffin was now leading a semblance of a respectable, normal, even quiet life, around Motown the oft-heard rejoinder to that premise was: just wait.

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The *Cloud Nine* album—the downplayed meaning of the title track now forgotten, its cover showing the Temptations in varying poses etched against a swirling pink-and-white parfait, then a common, and now a comical, visual abstraction of a drug high—went to No. 4 pop, No. 1 R&B in early spring 1970. While it reconnected the Tempts to the arabesque interrupted by the diversions with the Supremes, that alliance had hardly run its course. Another track from the *Join* LP, a redux of Smokey Robinson's "I'll Try Something New," went No. 25 pop, No. 8 R&B in early spring, and there were new dual projects set for later in the year.

Cloud Nine bore seven tracks, five written or cowritten by Whitfield and Strong; another, "I Gotta Find a Way (To Get You Back)," credited to Whitfield-Strong, Eddie Kendricks, Eddie Holland, and Cornelius Grant; and two pop-soul covers, "Hey Girl" and "Love Is a Hurtin' Thing." But the grabber other than the title track was the next Whitfield statement, "Runaway Child, Running Wild," which drew out the childhood of shame alluded to in "Cloud Nine," mushrooming and weaving its desperation into a proto-rock opera of a teenage runaway "frightened and confused, which way will you choose? . . . roaming through the city, going nowhere fast." Strong's again uncompromising lyrics had little pity for the kid's plight, taunting, "Oh, lost with no money, you start to cry / But remember you left home wanting to be grown, so dry your weepin' eyes." The background hooks alternated from wails of "I want my mama" and "Listen to your heartbeat, it's beating much too fast," to the voice of his conscience: "Runaway child, running wild / You better go back home where you belong."

The arrangement, kicked off by a bluesy electric piano playing off Coffey's coiled guitar, foamed into a spiraling psychedelic effect parting for Edwards's raw-nerved opening—"You played hooky from school / And you can't go out to play, yeah/Mama said, 'For the rest of the week / In your room you gotta stay,' yeah"—then one rhythmic phase rose and dissolved into another as the voices did the same, with each Temptation getting his turn. The phases were sometimes funky, sometimes bluesy, sometimes hushed, sometimes earsplitting. The song was novel, free-form—and long. After a fairly conventional five minutes, Whitfield went off on a four-minute detour of pure instrumentation,

an organ-driven profusion that kept rumbling on . . . and on . . . and on, before the Tempts returned from the woods for a final cautionary verse, Whitfield finally letting the track fade out after nine minutes and thirty-eight seconds.

This too posed problems, given the protocols of the industry, in which it was a criterion to limit the duration of songs to around three minutes, so as to get them sandwiched between pimple cream commercials on AM radio—the only venue for Top 40 pop, though the longer-form turf of FM, album-oriented radio was coming into vogue. Records that went on too long had to be abridged, such as Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" in 1965 and the Doors' "Light My Fire" in 1967, both of which, at six minutes, were chopped in half. Faced with this reality, Phil Spector, whose production of the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" came in at 3:53, slyly sent it out with "2:53" on the label, trying to con program directors—needlessly once it took off.

Having joined Spector as a "madman genius," Whitfield in his willful flaunting of unwritten rules showed symptoms of an ego grown corpulent. Always egocentric, if harmless, he had come to believe that Motown revolved around him like that pink parfait. He didn't merely come into the studio—he made a grand entrance, often after spending the day at the track, wrapped in expensive duds, Afro teased to the skies, diamond rings glinting, wads of big bills bulging in his hand that he'd set on the control room board and count out slowly. From the first bars of the "Runaway Child" sessions in October and November 1968, everything seemed to suggest that he was proprietary about it; that it was *his* work, with the Temptations his props.

As Otis trenchantly puts it: "Norman was a nice guy, but he'd gotten to be a little strange." At the slightest sigh of discontent from the group, he would rage, "If you guys don't wanna do this, I'll get somebody in here who wants a number one hit." Avoiding any scenes, they didn't confront Whitfield about whether he was consciously reducing their vocal time so he could increase his "maestro" genius and either consciously or subconsciously demote them, but the seed planted with "Runaway Child" would not recede.

Even so, they loved the results he was getting for them. The song was can't-miss all the way, and when released on January 30—or, rather, only the first 4:50 of it, still making it one of the longest singles

in memory—with “I Need Your Lovin’” on the flip, it screamed to No. 6 on the pop chart in early spring, No. 1 on the R&B. With it, the new Temptations template was dug in: a hard funk/blues groove, a carousel of lead vocals and cleverly differentiated background vocals, and extended, run-on, free-form instrumentation.

In the continuing glut of the group’s hot wax, there were essentially two Temptations apotheoses, the daring new one and the comforting old one, with more than a little overlap. A month after “Runaway Child” was out came “I’ll Try Something New,” a precious duet by Eddie and Diana. Then, in early May, just as it and “Child” had peaked, the next Tempts—or was it Norman Whitfield?—single, “Don’t Let the Joneses Get You Down,” was ready to go. Another seed of psychedelic funk, overshifted to a breakneck four-by-four beat, this time the message shifted to a disquisition on the rat race—“Keeping up with the Joneses, it only makes your life a mess / Bill collectors, tranquilizers and gettin’ deeper in debt”—and while it was a relatively lukewarm issue, when released, with “Since I Lost You” on the reverse, its sonic sorcery and irresistible vocals lugged it to No. 20 pop, No. 2 R&B in midsummer.

Over the course of 1969, it was entirely possible to hear new Temptations songs virtually every month. In July there was the soundtrack of the syndicated TV special *The Temptations Show*—as good a time capsule of their hydra-headed late-sixties alter egos as can now be found (*if* it can be found), careening from their hits to “I’ve Got to Be Me,” from “Hello Young Lovers” to “Ol’ Man River,” “Swanee,” and “Old Folks,” with lame comedy bits sprinkled in, something Melvin seemed to have a real flair for. Even a trifle like this made noise, hitting No. 2 on the R&B list. More substantively, their latest single, “I Can’t Get Next to You,” dropped, with Whitfield smartly taking a break from the grim ills of the world to get back to some good old-fashioned R&B bombast mixed with ticklish Smokey-style lyrics.

“I Can’t Get Next to You” was, with “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg,” a defining Temptations song, tellingly, given that as brilliant as the psychedelic stuff was, the later songs seemed more rooted to the times than to the long run. “Next” was a sustaining *and* perpetuating song, entrenching those wonderfully whittled vocal parts and even the indelible intro that had the group, sans any music, whooping it up, pep-rally-like,

before Dennis broke in, "Hey everybody, hold it, hold it—listen . . ." Whereupon a fabulous, sinewy blues piano line detonated a three-note horn/guitar blast, cranking up a delirious clatter of rhythm. It was a new Motown soul stream, owing not to Sly Stone or anyone else, and not derived from any idiom but from all pertinent musical influences—R&B, funk, and rock—with key and meter changes, blaring voices that suddenly fell to whispers, all of it done with effortless, joyous conviction. The Tempts' revolving vocals were never more discreetly and pungently cleaved, such as Dennis coming out of the break with "I can turn back the hands of time, you better believe I can," met by an Otis boast that "I can make the seasons change, just by waving my hand."

It took Whitfield five sessions in late June and early July to get it right, but right it was. Released on July 30, it screamed up the charts, landing at No. 1 on the pop chart the week of October 18, displacing "Sugar Sugar" after four weeks, to spend two weeks at the top (and four at the head of the R&B chart) before Elvis knocked it out with "Suspicious Minds," and not to fall out of the Top 40 for fifteen weeks, the longest such run of any Temptations record.

Not that Whitfield was done with the social harrumphing or spaced-out funk excursions. When the next Temptations album came in late September, *Puzzle People*, "Next to You" was about the only unvarnished R&B on a pastiche of proto-funk of the sort that Stevie Wonder would perfect in his breakout 1970s albums, with some of the same weapons—electrified keyboards, Sgt. Pepper-style tape overdubs and reverb, and refracted sounds from the Moog synthesizer that had rarely been used outside of novelty records and even more rarely in soul. The tracks, filled out by chaff, B-sides, and covers—"Hey Jude," the Isley Brothers' "It's Your Thing," Marvin Gaye's "That's the Way Love Is," O. C. Smith's "Little Green Apples"—were sonic pleasures, but thematically neutral, save for two cuts. One, the provocatively titled "Slave," cadged Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang," right down to the "ugh aah!" background grunting, with Eddie wailing, "Jailer, bring me water!"

The other was the first Temptations song explicitly about race, "Message from a Black Man," an updating of James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" with the gleeful euphoria now wizened to a sober, seething six-minute dirge commenced by an oddly

upbeat mandolin intro giving way to a sometimes catatonic beat and minimal instrumentation, the lyrics parroting Brown's "Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud!" with "Say it loud! No matter how hard you try, you can't stop me now!" Eddie made the statement in his vocal: "Your eyes are open / But you refuse to see / The laws of society / Were made for both you and me," sung with no rancor nor real nuance nor irony. Perhaps Whitfield and Strong *had* no real point beyond the obvious. In any case, the Tempts were skittish about the racial emphasis, and would shy away from performing the song onstage.

Puzzle People, its cover situating the group on the steps of a non-descript city building, looking dour in flower-print, leather, or monochromatic "ghetto chic" outfits and, for Eddie and Paul, snap-brim hats, was released on September 23—the same day as a new LP with the Supremes, *Together*, the milking of that collaboration not yet having run dry. (Nor had the pecking order changed; the cover portrayed the faces of the Supremes as wispy clouds towering above and dwarfing the Temptations below.) Again composed of Motown and other cover songs, it was a weak stew indeed, save perhaps for the only "hip" cover, "The Weight," by the then obscure rockers the Band, a jazzy, upbeat version with a surprisingly effective lead vocal by Eddie of the biblical parable of Jesus "pulling into Nazareth" and offering wary townsfolk to "put the load on me." Released as a single a month after "Can't Get Next to You," again two Temptations songs rose in unison, though "The Weight" ran out of steam at No. 46 pop, No. 33 R&B, not half bad for such an eccentric entry, and the album went to No. 28 pop and No. 6 R&B.

By then, a second TV special with the two groups had been hatched, *G.I.T. on Broadway*, the acronym here standing for the lesser-recognized "gettin' it together," which was apt since the show was a lesser product. Broadcast on NBC on November 12, 1969, it pitted the two most compelling black acts in the world in a series of show tunes and skits. One, "The Student Mountie," required the Tempts to don red Mountie uniforms and ham it up with the Supremes, who played Indian girls in buffalo skins and moccasins—a memory that makes Otis shudder. "Sure, it was embarrassing," he confirms, with no need to. "But again, you did what they wanted, picked up the check, and hoped no one ever mentioned it again." He laughs. "So I really appreciate you askin' about it, man."

Though the show was not the ratings winner *TCB* had been, its inevitable soundtrack, retitled *On Broadway*, made it into the Top 40 and, bewilderingly, No. 4 R&B at the end of a hectic and exhausting year. But at least now that the good-soldier buddy act with the Supremes was at last and mercifully done, they could give all their time to their own affairs. Touring nonstop over the first half of 1970, they would see two more massive hits come their way—but also the beginning of the end of their glory days.

Ball of Confusion

No one was happier that the distraction of the Temptations' detours with the Supremes was over than Whitfield, who each time they'd come back to him for their primary work had to reclaim the group from the crassly commercial chaff Motown had fed them. Dennis, in particular, he believed, suffered from the low intensity demanded from the group during those diversions, and constantly needed a fire to be lit under his behind. Whitfield would ride the rather docile Edwards hard, intentionally trying to prick him, getting under his skin, until Dennis would finally lash at him to back off, whereupon Norman would scream, "That's it! That's what I want! Gimme that emotion in the song, goddammit!"

For now, group and producer were still at their creative peak, and the next two singles proved it. Their parting shot to that convulsive year of 1969, a year they owned, was the December release of "Psychedelic Shack," the title playing on the common parlance of the day for "underground" music clubs frequented by hippies. And while Barrett Strong's lyrics extolled one such hangout—a place "right around the corner, just across the track" with incense burning, tails and beads, where "you can have your fortune told" and "learn the meaning of soul" with "music so high, you can't get over it, so low

you can't get under it"—for the Tempts it was like being locked in one room of the shack, waiting to be called out. Indeed, Whitfield's original six-minute cut was nearly an instrumental, awash with acid-soul electric guitar wah-wahing and a wild double bass line slamming the rhythm. The only recognizable Motown element was the jazzy drum-cymbal intro lifted from Whitfield's version of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" with Gladys Knight and the Pips, which, preceded by the "hold it everybody, listen" preamble from "I Can't Get Next to You," marked the first known use of sampling—that is, recycling something from a different record, which would of course later become a rap and hip-hop staple (with many fragments sampled from classic Motown songs).

One of the lyrical commands of the tune—"Come in and take a look at your mind"—seemed directed at Whitfield given the elongated three-minute jam session after the final verse, which the group believed took the sting from their vocals. Had it not been released as a single with the jam cut out, the Tempts would have raised hell, but it irked them that the original was on the ensuing *Psychedelic Shack* album, as well as several other cuts in the same vein, one, "Hum Along and Dance," almost completely devoid of vocals. They also stewed about the openly pro-drug "Tale a Stroll Thru Your Mind," an eight-minute paean to pot, risking their wholesome image (and TV gigs). Conversely, they bridled that the searing protest anthem "War," branded by Edwards's rendering of Strong's killer hook, "War! Huh! What is it good for? Absolutely *nothin'!*" and underscored by Melvin counting off in a military cadence, "Hup two-three-four," was, against their wishes, not released as a single because Motown determined that *it* would hurt their image. Instead, Edwin Starr's cover of it, produced by Whitfield, went to No. 1.

Still, they were again pacified when "Psychedelic Shack" went to No. 7 pop and No. 2 R&B in late winter 1970, and the LP—its cover a kitschy period cliché, with head shots of four of them spaced around an illustrated "shack" and Melvin sitting in the lotus position under a "Flower Power" sign—rose to No. 9 pop, No. 1 R&B, an oddity to be sure since there would only be one single from it, another harbinger of the advent of album-oriented rock and roll but depriving the mass market a hearing of two other glorious Temptations acid-soul tracks, "It's Summer" and "Friendship Train."

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Whitfield had an even more explosive punch in reserve, which was revealed in the next single, “Ball of Confusion.” Released in early May, as “Shack” began to fade, this was indeed a balled-up stick of TNT, encompassing just about every musical idiom and effect Whitfield could throw in, and every two cents Barrett Strong could inject about the mostly awful condition of the planet. The intro was a taste of the apocalyptic journey ahead, with an adamant, heavily echoed Dennis channeling Melvin, screaming as if a drill sergeant, “One, two, one-two-three-four—*oowwww*!” This sparked the bone-deep thumping of James Jamerson’s bass and a pair of electric guitar chords distorted and synthesized to sound like air-raid sirens, whereupon an uncharacteristically mocking Eddie began a bitter narrative about “people movin’ out, people movin’ in. Why? Because of the color of their skin.”

Fanning the growing flame, the lyrics growled about people running but not being able to hide, about eye-for-eye vengeance, craven politicians, and a laundry list of ills and issues that included segregation, determination, demonstration, integration, aggravation, humiliation, cities ablaze, drugs, and unspoken obligations to our nation, all as the chorus chanted, “Rap on, brother!” Before it was over, scenes of a passing cultural parade included mod clothes, cities aflame in the summertime, hippies moving to the hills, new Beatles records (which had by now ended), moon rockets, city inspectors, bill collectors, suicide, and people all over the world shouting to end the war—all signs of the times that had become so humdrum that Melvin could every now and then wryly intone, “And the band played on . . .”

“Ball of Confusion” packed in the funk, R&B, jazz, and spaced-out rock like nothing else ever put on hot wax, and the Tempts nailed it all, amazingly given the syllabic overload of the lyrics. Released with “It’s Summer” on the flip, it too quickly scaled the charts, peaking at No. 3 pop, No. 2 R&B in midsummer—meaning that within less than two years, the group had delivered six Top 10 pop and eight Top 10 R&B hits.

And they weren’t slacking off, either. The last six months of 1970 ferried in *Greatest Hits, Volume 2* (the only contemporary LP with “Ball of Confusion”); a live album of their recent performance at London’s Talk of the Town club (the last time they’d release a live

album until 2004); and the seasonal *The Temptations Christmas Card*. The first two charted in the pop Top 20 and went to No. 5 R&B. No one really seemed to notice that the next single, Whitfield and Strong's high-minded "Ungena Za Ulimwengu (Unite the World)," was a rare stumble, essentially a shrill "Ball of Confusion," its screaming synthesizers and funky guitars trying hard to lift clumsy deep thoughts about such things as "sick minds, sad sights," wiretapping, kidnapping, and whether the Russians would "push the button."

While in retrospect the Swahili in the title and some of the noble sentiments ("give peace a chance") were a forerunner of musical rubrics, or an echo of one by John Lennon, in real time the single was a non-starter, going no higher than No. 33 pop, and a still respectable No. 8 R&B. Not that this left any kind of stain on the Tempts, who chugged along, playing to sold-out houses on the road and continuing their conquest of TV screens across whitebread America. In 1970, they guest starred on *The Andy Williams Show* and a special hosted by Smokey Robinson; in 1971, on another *Ed Sullivan Show*.

The band indeed was playing on, in a dizzying symphony, their world seemingly without end. But all the while, storms were gathering that the few who were aware of them figured would end without anything but grave damage to the Temptations. Indeed, for very different reasons, the winds were already starting to carry away Eddie Kendricks and Paul Williams.

The problem with Eddie had been bubbling ever since David was tossed out, and that he was becoming almost as big a problem within the group as David had been was hardly coincidental. He had continued confiding in David, who would fill his head with conspiracy theories about Motown, Otis, and God knows what else, which sunk in further because whenever they got together David would ply him with cocaine. For both, money, or lack of it, was the root of the Motown evil, in their belief that the group was being royally ripped off. Years later, David would say that when the Tempts were earning \$10,000 a night in fees, the group was being paid all of \$500 a week, and that situation apparently changed little after he was let go. While Otis is careful about laying too much blame on Gordy, it clearly pisses

him off that the account books were closed off to the group and that Motown's lack of creative investment strategies severely limited their earning potential.

Back then, in fact, their economic condition at times became so dire that they may have resorted to desperate measures. Rick James, in his autobiography *The Confessions of Rick James: Memoirs of a Super Freak*, published in 2007 three years after his death, leveled the jaw-dropping claim that "a few members of the Temptations turned to pimping their women out despite the fact they were Number One artists and were only seeing a 'low' weekly salary despite being huge stars."

If that's true—or even if it's not—anger about money was such a consistent bellyache within the group, and especially with Eddie, that Ruffin could always turn him further against Gordy by playing on it. That not even the Temptations had the luxury of taking a breather from backbreaking touring and had to spend more than three hundred days a year on the road seemed like slave labor to Eddie, who in the late 1960s saw Paul Williams wear down from the burdens of all those miles on the road. Paul was so weak at times that he needed to travel with oxygen tanks. On plane rides, he would be hunkered down in his seat, mask on his nose, sucking in breathable air.

To Eddie, it all came back to money and Gordy. Everyone would be in better shape, he argued, if Gordy's penury didn't force them to bust their humps and even jeopardize their health to make a pitiful few bucks. In 1991, shortly before he died, Kendricks gave a rare interview to a Chicago TV station in which he showed not a scintilla of gratitude to Gordy and hinted that the cuddly Eddie Kendricks image in the 1960s and '70s belied what went on behind the scenes. Looking back, it was obvious he had stored up decades of resentment, with manifold origins, insisting, "Berry Gordy is a man I do not know. I only met him about three times. I really don't know anything about him. I just know he didn't particularly care for me. . . . I'm just not a guy who will brown-nose. I say what I think I should say, what I feel, what I think I can sleep with. I don't think I should 'yes-man' everything you say. And I didn't agree with a lot of things I saw happen, so we just did not get to really know each other." Inferring that Gordy disdained blacks not of his pedigree, he added, "I'm from Alabama, he's from Michigan, and maybe I wasn't supposed to talk back to him. I intended to speak my piece. I left [the group] to speak my piece."

He went on, "What did Berry Gordy do for the Temptations? He really didn't do a lot for us, 'cause we already knew where we were going," and revealed that as early as 1965 he began to consider quitting the group "because of things I thought weren't quite proper [at Motown]. We were working with people . . . who really didn't have our interests at heart. [We] didn't get the help we deserved." Even so, he maintained that he actually didn't ever want to leave the Tempts but rather simply to moonlight by recording a solo album, a common practice within many groups. "But it was not allowed," he said.

These were grievances that Ruffin kept manipulating, pounding away over and over to Eddie that Gordy had robbed them all blind and gave not a fig about them beyond using their voices to make money, and that their refusal to fall in line marked them for a whacking. His own expatriation from the group, he insisted, was just the start of a purge that would inevitably claim Eddie as well. "You're next, brother," he'd tell him, between snorted lines. Otis, he'd make sure to add, was just an agent for Gordy's vindictiveness, a traitor to the mission of the Temptations.

David had mastered variations of this spiel, having tried to embolden other Motown artists and turn them against Gordy. He would almost giddily admit to a hanger-on variously described as a valet, personal assistant, or gofer, Tony Turner, that he saw his rap having an effect on Eddie. "Now it's getting to him," he said. "Now the motherfucker's beginning to see. I told him so. [Others] thought I was crazy, but they're seeing it too."

Whether any of the others actually took his advice is unclear, but Eddie surely did. By 1971, the bond that had kept Eddie with the Tempts after David was let go had been eaten away. No longer was there a tacit understanding that whatever Eddie said and did to show his discontent with David's absence would not disturb his standing with them, a brazen assumption that had led him to skip several gigs—the same offense, of course, that had gotten David fired. He even neglected to show up for a local TV dance party show one day, impelling them to go on as a foursome with Otis lip-syncing Eddie's falsettos. Sheepishly, he promised not to do it again, and no more was made of it.

But even that sort of forbearance didn't mollify Eddie once he convinced himself that his word meant squat within the group and that Otis's role had grown from decision-maker to dictator. In the early 1970s, Eddie decided to test how much stock Otis put in his opinions,

if any. It was time, he said, to confront the money issue head-on, to use the Temptations' standing to put a squeeze play on Gordy.

"O, we should go out on strike," he told him. "No more touring, no more records, no nothin' until Berry gives us a bigger slice of the pie."

Such a mutiny was unheard of at Motown, but Eddie had watched Stevie Wonder, when he turned twenty-one that same year, refuse to re-sign with Motown and move to New York as a free agent to make music with complete creative control—a sort of passive strike that would eventually compel Gordy to come crawling back with a colossal \$13 million contract to keep him at Motown. For Otis, however, the issue was not merely one of money or even loyalty to Big Daddy, but that in the Motown autocracy, in which talent had to constantly prove itself, whatever leverage they had was puny.

"I knew what Eddie was saying," he says. "We were all being shafted, that was true. But the fact was, Berry held his power over us. Unless you were Diana Ross or Stevie Wonder, you really *had* no power. We couldn't have left because he had us under contract, and if we didn't record all it would have meant was we'd fall behind other acts. Berry didn't care who sang the hits, just that someone could, and there were acts begging like dogs for a Norman Whitfield song.

"It would've been a self-destructive thing to do. No person was bigger than the Tempts, but no act was bigger than Motown. So I told Eddie, 'We gotta do the opposite of a strike, we gotta keep recording as much as we can.' That was the only way we could get in a stronger financial position."

Eddie wasn't convinced, and demanded it be put to a vote, but as usual Melvin fell in line behind Otis. Eddie had thought he could work on Dennis, telling him the lead voices of the Temptations had to stick together or else all wind up like David Ruffin. But Dennis, who was so timid that Otis, even though Dennis always backed him up, couldn't stand it—"Goddammit, speak up! Take a stand on something!" he raged at him once—followed the prevailing wind, effectively killing Eddie's plan.

Paul too voted nay, but was far more willing to cut Eddie slack. "Paul was torn," Otis says, "between Eddie and the group. When Eddie'd get all crazy, Paul would say, 'Otis, he didn't mean it. You know Eddie, he's a hothead. Leave him to me, I'll talk him down.' " He often did, and after the strike failed, doing so may have saved Eddie's job. Shortly after, Eddie, licking his wounds, came by to see Paul, burning hot.

As Joe “Scrooney” Williams, Paul’s younger brother, who was there, recalls, “Eddie was stomping around, saying, ‘I’m not gonna hit another note with this group.’ Paul, who’d heard that a million times, told him, ‘Aw, Eddie, come on, man, not again.’ Then Eddie pulled out this book he had listing all their concerts. He said, ‘Lookit here, Paul, we sold out Shea Stadium and we didn’t get a dime. I’m sick of this shit.’

“Eddie had it in his head to go see Berry Gordy and put it to him and Paul couldn’t stop him but he wouldn’t let him go alone. So we all jumped in Eddie’s car and he drove over to Berry’s office on Woodward Avenue. Eddie jumped out and Paul and I were trying to keep up with him. ‘Cause he blew past all the secretaries and everybody and walked in on Berry.

“That was some scene. Man, I couldn’t believe anyone could talk to Berry Gordy the way Eddie was. He was pointing his finger and cussing and I swear he was gonna jump over the desk at him, but Paul kept saying, ‘Eddie, calm down, man.’ Eddie said, ‘Hey, this motherfucker is ripping us off!’ Finally, Eddie blew out again, saying, ‘I ain’t singing with this group no more, I’m done!’ Paul hung back to talk to Berry, and Berry told him, ‘Paul, this ain’t right. You gotta straighten things out.’ And Paul said, ‘I’ll talk to him, we’ll work it out.’”

Fortunately for Eddie, he did. And Gordy was remarkably tolerant about the incident, no doubt with the sales of Temptations records in the equation. Still, Eddie would remain on a slow boil for the next several years. During that time, he would add another grievance to fuel his hatred of everything Motown—Paul’s alarming deterioration, and how the group was handling it. Or more accurately, how Otis was, which, Eddie believed, reflecting his hang-up that he and Paul were always looked upon as “Alabama trash,” was meant to kick them both into the Motown garbage bin.

Eddie’s sense of loyalty to and solidarity with his boyhood pal had by now overridden Paul’s arrogance and imperiousness that had caused so much friction between them in the early and mid-1960s. It genuinely pained him to see Paul reduced to a husk of the man who had been as straight as an arrow, with a voice strong and pitch perfect and the coordination of a world-class athlete. Booze had eroded all that, taking a horrible toll on him.

What few knew at the time was that he had sickle-cell anemia, the blood disorder present in around one in five thousand African Americans. Not clear is whether he had the disease, which cuts a male victim's life expectancy to forty-two years, or sickle-cell *trait*, a survivable condition. Whichever it was, any symptoms of the condition—fatigue, fever, difficulty breathing, arthritic aches and pains—were latent until he neared thirty.

Not incidentally, that was after he'd taken up with an attractive Motown hairstylist, Winnie Brown, who was a cousin of Florence Ballard and thus had close relationships with two Motown alcoholic lost souls. Looking to move deeper into the Motown A-list, it apparently mattered little to her that Paul was still married, though Scrooney Williams says that Paul and Mary had separated when Paul fiddled with her. His yen for her was based on the fact that, according to Don Foster, Brown was "worldly," at least to a guy like Paul. "Remember where these guys were from," Foster says. "They were country boys, they grew up in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, in small towns, and she was a city woman, she showed him things, if you catch my drift, that no woman had. She moved fast. One day she was doing the Supremes' hair, then Paul had moved in with her and she was traveling with him all over."

Says Scrooney Williams of the relationship, "My brother was the kind of man who got very lonely when he was alone. I don't think Paul fell in love with Winnie, he just needed to ease the pain of the separation from Mary, be with someone. And Winnie was there and she was a very nice lady. In fact, Winnie Brown took care of me and my brother Marvin. When Paul went on the road, we stayed at her house, with her mother and her daughter, until Paul would come back.

"Paul liked that she had all these big ideas about them going into business together. I didn't even know they were lovers. I thought they were business partners. Because they were involved right away in a business, Celebrity House. That was one of her ideas, a combination beauty shop, barbershop, and restaurant, like a spa kind of thing for men and women. I think it was one of the first places like that, and Paul put a lot of money into it. But it never really took off and that hurt Paul a lot."

As did, many have noted, the fact that Winnie began cheating on him, at least theoretically causing him to reach even more for the bottle. By the time they were done in 1972—not incidentally the same year

Celebrity House went under—Paul had quickly moved in with another woman named Ronnie Langston, while still holding out hope that he and Mary would reconcile. But he was now spread seriously thin.

Still, as racked by pain and respiratory occlusion as he was, he wouldn't relent and go see a doctor until it was far too late. While Otis saw what he calls "a general physical breakdown," Paul, hooper that he was, admitted to only one physical problem, which coincidentally justified, according to him, why he was drinking so much. "He told me it was because his feet were hurting him," says Scrooney.

In classic denial, he kept on boozing and, incredibly, smoking. People would do a double take when they would see him take off his oxygen mask and light up a cigarette. Eddie, also hooked on nicotine, hardly helped with his chain-smoking, even around Paul. But as Otis says, "Paul just didn't want to see what he was doing to himself. Or he might have been afraid of what a doctor would tell him if he went to one. He would say things like, 'Don't worry, Otis. I can handle it,' meaning the drinking, and that 'I'll be at the next show.' That was all that mattered to him, he loved being up on a stage. But he didn't want to see how bad he looked up there, and making us look bad. The man couldn't even breathe, so how could he sing?"

All he really was doing with any dexterity by the early 1970s was slamming back whatever hooch he could get his hands on. As his brother recalls, "When he had a barbecue, he'd use beer as a meat tenderizer."

Otis, Melvin, and Eddie tried hard to get him to stop, though their verbal pleas were less than compelling to him, and not a little hypocritical, since none of them qualified for sainthood. On the road they'd tell the bartenders and room service people not to serve him liquor, and each day they'd conduct sweeps of his room, confiscating any bottles hidden in it, which there always were because Paul would have a gofer, usually Beans Bowles's son Tom, smuggle up to the room what he could buy at the closest liquor store. "We tried, we did the best we could," Foster says, "but you cannot stop a man from drinking himself to death. Whatever we did, it didn't work. It got so bad that we couldn't send out Paul's uniform to the cleaners with the other guys' because it reeked of booze. It just came out with his sweat."

When he took the stage, the Paul Williams who had once been the epitome of cool was an ear- and eyesore. His voice became more ravaged with each performance, and with no choice the group decided

they'd have to cut his microphone and get someone to sing his vocals anonymously from backstage and pipe them through the sound system. A perfect candidate for that happened to be right under their nose, Richard Street, Otis and Melvin's old confrere with the Distant before Johnnie Mae Matthews blew them off, and of course Melvin's "cousin" and running mate from the old neighborhood.

In the years since, Street had floated to Motown as lead singer of a low-level group called the Monitors. Then, because Street had a good instinct for a marketable song, Gordy shunted him to the Creative Control department, helping decide which records made it out the door. Street was a tenor, higher in pitch than Paul, but he was a versatile singer and he had a partly shared history with the Temptations that made for a nice sense of symmetry. He also—and this was now a real factor—was tall and lean, and knew some of the basic moves that had originally been developed and honed by Paul. At first, Street was ambivalent, worrying that Paul would resent him for undercutting him and showing him up.

But there was a sense of emergency to it, and Otis could still use his old ghetto jive to talk Richard into anything. And so, kept out of sight from Paul, he was tutored on the background parts. Surprisingly, it worked. With Paul's microphone off, few in the house would have any idea he wasn't singing—though it would be turned back on again when Paul would do his solo number, either "The Impossible Dream" or "For Once in My Life," sometimes satisfactorily, sometimes not so much. The setup was demeaning and highly embarrassing to him—that is, it would have been had Paul known it was happening. Amazingly, he didn't for a long while, so in denial was he about his situation. Most tragically, he didn't fathom that he resembled not the impeccably coordinated dancer he once was but a guy doing an imitation of a drunkard in a slapstick burlesque routine.

Don Foster, who had seen that transformation, could only wince. "When they'd be dancing, Paul wouldn't know where he was or what to do. He'd stray from them and Otis or Melvin would grab him by the elbows and lead him back to his microphone—and he was the guy who'd choreographed the song, and who you'd watch to see how a move was supposed to be done." Not to mention the guy who had been so demanding and intolerant of imperfection. Now, almost unimaginably, that guy would make people laugh derisively and wonder if the

Temptations had put bad slapstick into the act. But Paul never wavered in his belief that he was organically a Temptation. Whether or not he actually believed that, it was something he *needed* to believe. Because without it, he had nothing worth living for.

The gathering twin hurricanes surrounding Eddie and Paul made landfall during a tumultuous two-week engagement at the Copacabana in November 1970, the triumphal aspect of which was dashed to pieces right from the start when, during the early shows, Otis received a call from Detroit with awful news: his mother, Hazel Williams, had gone into the hospital for some minor surgery over a weekend and died on the table.

He had visited with Haze the day before going to New York. Other than her asthma she seemed fine, but in a jolting moment she told him out of the blue, "When you get back home I won't be here. You're never going to see me again." He told her she was talking crazy and left for New York. Now she was gone. Devastated, he fell into his wife Ann's arms weeping. He made a quick trip home to bury the woman who had changed his life by taking him from Texarkana to Detroit, then had to go back for the next show. But he was numb, distracted, and at one point his voice cracked during an important chorus harmony, drawing a malevolent stare from a less than sympathetic Eddie, which many in the audience couldn't help but notice.

Otis, who'd just about had it with Eddie, saw the stare and was livid about it. But he was in no mood, as he says, to "lock ass" with Eddie and let it drop. But Eddie wouldn't. Apparently looking for some excuse to have it out with Otis, he waited for him between the evening's two shows. When he found out Otis and Melvin had slipped out the back door, he flipped out, leaving as well, and did not come back. Bare minutes before showtime, Foster told Otis, "It doesn't look like Eddie's gonna make it." They had to go on as a foursome and pray the crowd would accept it, which they did, sparing them the PR nightmare of the Copa issuing refunds, at their expense, and perhaps even being banned from the club, though that became a moot point when in another sign of the times Jules Podell died in 1973 and it became a discotheque.

As Otis recalls of that night, "Eddie left and he never came back, and that was when we decided, or were forced into deciding,

that Eddie would be leaving the group. We didn't try to stop him and he didn't want to stay, so that was that." He recalls that just the night before, the two of them had briefly spoken.

"Corn," he told him, "I've known you for ten years but I feel like I never really knew you at all."

"Otis," Eddie said, "you never really *did* know me."

Eddie wasn't gone just yet. With their current album in production and a January 31 *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance on tap, he consented to stay an official Temptation until then. That would allow Otis and Melvin time to sign up another replacement—something they had to do without the input of Paul.

Sadly, the Copa would be Paul's requiem as well. "During those shows," Otis says, "was when I really saw that we couldn't cover for Paul anymore. He just couldn't do it. I felt so bad for him, but we were known for our precision and Paul was bringing us down. Most of all, he needed to get well."

Even in his condition, Paul seemed to know his time was short, and he was not going to go meekly or pitifully. Throughout the two weeks, Richard Street did his thing from offstage, save for Paul's solo turns, which came off without incident. At the final show, the Tempts would again hold their collective breath as he began "For Once in My Life." Paul focused his eyes, summoned every drop of energy and verve he could, and gave a stunning and powerful performance, galvanizing the audience into a rousing ovation.

Standing in a line behind him, the Temptations remained motionless for a full minute, allowing him to bask in the din. And, says Otis, "Pretty soon we were all crying. He was just so proud, and were so proud of him. I remember now how happy he looked. It was like he was saying, 'I may not be here much longer, so remember me like this.'"

Whitfield wasn't much interested in finding a proper send-off for Eddie or Paul in the studio. But by coincidence, the Temptations had been pestering him that it was enough already with the acid funk, that they needed to get into the contemporary trend of gushy romantic soul, or *back* into it, since they had after all pioneered that idiom,

which had been taken over by buttery singers like Tyrone Davis and Clarence Carter and especially velvety Philadelphia groups like the Delfonics, the Moments, and the Stylistics.

Because Motown even now revolved around the writer-producers and not the talent, Whitfield still made the call. He could have refused, but the man was nothing but smart about what made music sell, and what it all came down to was timing; no matter how good, a song had to hit the public at the right time. And after the din and deep thinking of the last two years, and the rise of mellowed-out soul, it was indeed time to retrench. Whitfield had kept his hand in the soft-soul pot, anticipating just such a juncture, and needed only to reach back for a languid melody he had noodled with a year before. He gave it to Barrett Strong to put a lyric on it, one with a soft lovelorn feel that Eddie could navigate with his signature cool, impassioned sex appeal.

As such, the song, “Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me),” was a clear throwback to the sound and flavor most people associated with the Temptations but that had lately been shunted aside: the pleas of real men who showed it was cool to cry, strong but vulnerable men shedding tears over women they imagined as perfect, who could turn them inside out in anguished passion—and, in this case, almost pitifully, divert them into the shadows, able only to fantasize.

“Just My Imagination” reeked with shimmering beauty, class, and schmaltz. The intro was a graceful blues guitar that meshed with an airy chorus of violins, a trembling vibraphone, and background voices purring “*oooooh*,” before Eddie, falsetto in full coo but just sad enough to portend that this was no happy love song, entered with the confession that every day he was staring out his window at the woman he was so lucky to have—that is, if he had her, admitting forlornly that “it was just my imagination, once again runnin’ away with me.” More visions told of being married with a family, then with strings and French horns rising, Paul punctuated the gloom, wailing with a quiver in his scarred voice, “Every night on my knees I pray . . .” He was met by Eddie finishing, “Dear Lord, hear my plea.” In the end, his “tender rhapsody” was spoiled by the truth that “in reality she doesn’t even know me.”

Pitiful as it was, every syllable was believable. As Otis listened to Eddie putting an unforgettable period on his Temptations career—he

now calls it Eddie's "finest moment"—he couldn't help but align the tone of the song with the melancholy in the room and the end of something he never wanted to lose.

"I believe that was on Eddie's mind when he did that vocal," says Otis. "It was like Paul at the Copa. Those were no ordinary performances. Those came from deep down, from their hearts and souls. Didn't matter that Eddie didn't even talk to us. I think he wanted to make it something special; he *needed* to. And he did. Even now, for me, it's hard for me to perform that song, or just to listen to it, because there's so many emotions it brings back. Not only about Eddie but Paul. So for a lot of reasons, that's a tough one to get through, even today."

So moved was Otis by the job Eddie turned in—he stayed in the studio all night with Whitfield getting the lead vocal right—that he rang him up the next day to tell him. "I wanted to reach out to him," Otis says. But Eddie was unreachable. All that remained for him were the last good-byes.

A few weeks later, on January 14, 1971, "Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)," backed with the homiletic "You Make Your Own Heaven and Hell Right Here on Earth" from *Psychedelic Shack*, was released. On the thirty-first, the Temptations gave it a boost, singing it on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which was closing in on the end of its twenty-five years on the air in May, as trenchant a gauge of changing pop culture tastes as any. Thus there is a heavy metaphoric dew that clings now to that appearance, the last one with the Temptations for Eddie Kendricks and Paul Williams. Thereafter, the group who had been a major shank of the culture now being recast would not have the same eminence. And perhaps had the Tempts known this, they would have made an effort to melt the air of frozen loathing on the set when they came on.

As it happened, the Sullivan producers unwittingly stoked the big chill by physically scattering them across three banks of white stairs. Clad in tuxes and red shirts, Dennis was seated on the left bank, Melvin, Otis, and Paul in the middle, Eddie alone on the right. In the early years, a staple of the act was the Tempts kibbitzing with each other during numbers, but now Eddie never cast as much as a glance at his

ex-brethren-to-be, his eyebrows knitting as he conveyed the confused emotions of the song, which he again ached. Paul in the tape of the show appears withered, small, and visibly shaking at times on the bottom step, though he did his line about praying on his knees with no problem. When it was over, there would be nothing communal backstage, no hugs between Eddie and the others, not even a handshake. They changed, with Eddie in his own room, and went out into the night, four in one direction, one in another.

"Just My Imagination," profiting from the exposure, leaped onto the charts. Heard on radios everywhere, black stations, white stations, and everything in between, it bounded to No. 1 pop and R&B by the first week of April, displacing "Me and Bobby McGee" and spending two weeks there before being knocked out by "Joy to the World." In all it would endure twelve weeks in the Top 40, ingrained as a classic love ballad then and thereafter.

By that spring, too, Motown had proffered Eddie a solo deal. Having been in the same boat as David, unable to sell himself to another label for the right price because his Motown contract had another three years on it, he moved the remaining years onto a new four-year contract, with an agreement to issue his debut solo LP right away, without waiting for a hit single to propel it into the marketplace. This was the album he had wanted to record as a break from the Tempts, a privilege Gordy had refused him (and all others within Motown groups until Michael Jackson won the okay for his first solo album in 1972).

Though Eddie, like Ruffin, whined about being stuck on the Motown "plantation," he, just like Ruffin, was blessed in having the ubiquitous Frank Wilson to produce him. Wilson complemented Eddie's songs with those written by Wilson and Chicago songwriter Leonard Caston Jr., former frontman of the R&B group the Radiants and son of Delta blues pianist Leonard "Baby Doo" Caston.

The result, the seven-track *All By Myself*, was released in April, a month after the official Motown announcement of his departure from the Temptations. Of course, a main priority for Wilson was to keep Eddie's songs in the ballpark of the Temptations' grooves, and they came out with the same smooth white-glove soul, but with nifty turns such as Eddie's proto-rap on Caston's "This Used to Be the

Home of Johnnie Mae,” a wistful journey back to lost youth—*not* about Johnnie Mae Matthews, though the irony was inescapable. The Tempts’ connection was also coyly conjured by the title of the song “So Hard for Me to Say Goodbye.” But on the whole there was a greater emphasis on heavier disco funk, such as the trippy “Let’s Go Back to Day One,” while the cover of Jimmy Webb’s “Can I” and “I Did It All for You” were doused with Philly International-style stringed pomp.

Motown wanted to position Eddie more in the Marvin Gaye niche of blended introspection and dance music—the cover of the album had him in full beard, à la Marvin, skinny as a rail, hungry to make a statement. But it would take time; the LP peaked at No. 80 pop, its two singles, “So Hard for Me to Say Goodbye” and “Can I,” going to No. 88 and No. 101, respectively. But on the R&B chart, *Myself* made it to an impressive No. 6, the singles into the R&B Top 40, all with very little promotion, serving notice that Eddie Kendricks was going to be in the game all by himself.

For the Temptations to stay in the game, they’d have to again fill a huge hole—two, actually, though it had been long resolved that Richard Street would step in for Paul in all aspects of the group’s functions. As was the case after Ruffin was axed, there were club and TV dates already booked, and money on the table. Paul was allowed to participate in recording sessions for their next album that would be driven by “Just My Imagination,” though Eddie didn’t stick it out, leading Whitfield to pad the tracks he had, most notably “Love Can Be Anything (Can’t Nothing Be Love but Love),” which swelled to nine minutes, and the almost frightening canticle of paranoia and cynicism, “Smiling Faces Sometimes,” which grew to over *twelve* minutes. Both were bolstered by Whitfield’s self-aggrandizing oceans of instrumentation, which in the latter case all but obscured the biting lyrics. Whitfield had planned to issue “Smiling Faces” as a pared-down single, but when Eddie, who sang the lead, became an ex-Temptation, he could only do that by recutting the song with the acid-soul trio the Undisputed Truth, whose version in May went to No. 3.

The ballad-heavy album, titled *Sky’s the Limit*—its cover a pastoral, soon-to-be-prophetic image of the group, Eddie and Paul

included, in the clouds in Sly Stone–style fringed leather outfits, save for Melvin, who looked like a preacher in a dark suit, hat, and cassock, a white dove on his finger, high and ethereally above a serene beach—came out at the same time as Eddie’s LP, going No. 16 pop, No. 2 R&B in midsummer.

Otis had by then hired a high tenor who could sing falsetto, Richard “Ricky” Owens, a member of the veteran Los Angeles soul quintet the Vibrations, who, like Eddie, was tall, gaunt, and cuddly. His group had just broken up, and Otis, who had seen the Vibrations perform often, took him right out on the road with the Tempts. His first show was at the Carter Barron Amphitheatre in D.C., where a shaking Owens flubbed the lines to “Just My Imagination.” The crowd jeered, unnerving him even further, and by the end of the show it was, Otis says, “a nightmare.”

The big worry was that word would get out that, as Foster puts it, “Ricky Owens couldn’t sing worth a shit.” As it was, only one night later, word had spread enough locally that the hall was only half filled, and Owens was just as bad. Coldhearted as it was, Otis had to can him right then, not having the option to let him grow into his new job. Having just lost their second signature voice and arguably their most popular member, they were at a crossroads—and more of their fan base was upset by Eddie’s exit than they’d been by David’s. And so, deciding not to rush in another terrified Kendricks clone, they ran out the summer as a quartet.

There never really was an official farewell for Paul; Otis confesses that he doesn’t exactly know when or where his last stage appearance was, other than that it was sometime early that summer. In fact, when they began work in May on their new album, *Solid Rock*, Paul was with them in the studio, though he could only make it through one song, “It’s Summer,” before his voice gave out. Otis, looking into Paul’s bloodshot eyes, told him he would need to “rest,” stop drinking, and get well before he could go back out on the road with the group. When Eddie heard about it, he cursed Otis to whoever would listen, and made some nasty remarks about the Temptations to the press.

Otis says, “Eddie didn’t think I had Paul’s interests in mind, but it wasn’t my choice to pull him off the road. It was Paul’s doctor. We’d finally convinced him to see one, and after he did the doctor told Don Foster that Paul had to come off the road, no ifs, ands, or buts, he was

just too sick. His respiratory system was shot, he had no lungs left, basically, and he may have had a spot on his liver.

“I mean, I never knew if I’d find him dead, or if he’d drop dead on the stage. One time I went to his room to wake him up. I shook him, called his name, but he just laid there. For a minute I thought, uh-oh, he’d gone and died. Then, like in slow motion, he began to move, but he could barely sit up. He said, ‘Otis, you don’t know how bad I feel.’”

He felt even worse, though, when Otis told him he couldn’t be a Temptation. For Paul Williams, who probably only now knew how far gone he was, it was not unlike someone taking a gun, pointing it at his head, and pulling the trigger.

Each Day Is a Lifetime

With Paul out of the picture, the Temptations could no longer put off a replacement for Eddie, lest *Solid Rock* be the product of a four-man group. During a gig in D.C., they auditioned a diminutive, twenty-one-year-old Kendricks soundalike from Baltimore, Otis Robert Harris Jr., who happened to be a fanatical Temptations buff. He had fronted a group called, whimsically, the Young Tempts—at least until Motown sued their label, which was owned by the erstwhile Motown stars the Isley Brothers, forcing the group to change its name to the Young Vandals. When they disbanded in 1971, it left Harris free to quixotically try out for the “Old Tempts,” and he sounded so much like Eddie that Melvin, Richard, and Dennis wanted him in. Otis, though, wavered, thinking Harris was too young to be in with a clutch of thirty-year-olds. But for once Otis was overruled and Harris—as *Damon Harris*, one Otis being enough—was given a four-year contract. No one could be sure how long *he* would last either, especially since he was so overly solicitous, calling his new mates “Mr. Williams,” “Mr. Franklin,” and so on—which of course they had joked about on the *TCB* show but now gave Otis the willies, because, he says, “It made me feel like a golden oldie.”

Harris came onto *Solid Rock* after several songs were cut by the Tempts as a quartet. This included Whitfield's replacement for "Smiling Faces Sometimes" as their next single, the peaceful, easy "It's Summer," a reworked version of the B-side of "Ball of Confusion" and an instant failure, reaching only No. 51 pop and No. 29 R&B, the Tempts' worst showing (save for "The Weight" with the Supremes) since 1963. Most of the album rejoined Whitfield and Strong with psychedelic soul, under protest from the Temptations, and soapbox fodder, such as his most declarative statement yet, "Stop the War," although a lack of new material led him to dredge up an old collaboration with the ill-fated Roger Penzabene, "The End of Our Road."

But the buzz would be on the second single, "Superstar (Remember How You Got Where You Are)," mostly because anyone familiar with the group's latest alteration heard it—correctly—as an upraised middle finger to Eddie and David. This came after public remarks by Eddie in which he claimed he'd left the Tempts because of Otis's and Melvin's "jealousy" and gloated about the failure of "It's Summer" and the successful redirection of "Smiling Faces Sometimes," which he took as proof that Whitfield had "lost interest" in the Temptations. Ruffin, never one to avoid inflaming an already simmering situation, piped in with the oh-by-the-way revelation that he and Eddie were thinking of luring Dennis Edwards away to join them in a new group—and that Paul Williams would also be involved when he got well.

Those were fighting words to Otis, and when Whitfield began to cut "Superstar," which was written about a producer friend of his, he demanded that it be conscripted and reworked to answer Eddie and David. Whitfield, who was also pissed off at Eddie's dragging him into the argument—although he likely *did* have less intensity for the Temptations now that Kendricks was gone, as would soon become evident—agreed. He and Strong came up with such barbs as (for David), "Superstar, good God, enjoy your champagne and caviar/And your chauffeur drivin' fancy car/But remember how you got where you are," and (for Eddie), "Bright lights, don't let the bright lights blind you/Bridges, don't burn 'em behind you."

While these zingers were intended as irony, a send-up of the two ex-Tempts' pretensions that they were bigger than they were, Eddie and David enjoyed being branded as superstars. And yet the song, a fast-paced chunk of pop-funk with loud horns and gritty piano and

guitar licks, carried no such undercurrent for more casual Temptations fans who would have been surprised to know that anything had changed within the group, such was Harris's dead-on imitation of Eddie. Far more important than any of the byplay was that the song, by rising to No. 18 pop and No. 8 R&B late in 1971, was a step back to prominence and a step ahead into another Temptations phase that would bring enduring popularity in spite of serious personnel shifts.

Indeed, the immediate future would require such resilience, given the uneven material Whitfield was feeding them. The last single from *Solid Rock*, "Take a Look Around," taking a cue from Curtis Mayfield's "Freddie's Dead," indicted the "junk man standing on the corner selling death," and pleaded, "In the name of God, won't somebody stop him, stop him, think about the children." Whitfield tried hard to create an antidrug anthem, opening with Valkyrie-style waves of horns, strings, and a harpsichord fugue, as well as deeply concerned, urgent vocals, but without Mayfield's sense of irony and playful funk it fell flat, its Top 30 pop and Top 30 R&B positions mainly a factor of the Tempts' brand.

The next single, and first from the follow-up album *All Directions*, was "Mother Nature," written not by Whitfield-Strong but recent Motown hires Dino Fekaris and Nick Zesses, who'd cowritten "I Just Want to Celebrate" for Rare Earth. (Fekaris would shoot the moon in 1979 with the Gloria Gaynor megahit "I Will Survive.") It was a beautiful and sensuous slow soul jam with a stirring lead by Dennis, but all the horns and strings on it couldn't pump any real juice into its grooves and it died at No. 92 pop in early summer, and never even made it onto the R&B chart—all in all, the worst showing ever by a Temptations single.

It was quickly dumped by DJs, who began playing the B-side, the Whitfield-Strong "Funky Music Sho' Nuff Turns Me On," a giddy gambol first recorded by Edwin Starr, which would go Top 30 R&B.

A fleeting thought for some around Motown was that the game might be up for the group, who had only made the Top 20 once since "Just My Imagination." For this, the Tempts blamed Whitfield, whom Otis believes "wasn't paying as much attention to the records we released as he should have." The material he picked out for *All Directions* didn't make them think otherwise. Of the eight tracks, only two were Whitfield-Strong compositions, both originally recorded by another Motown act, "Sho' Nuff," and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," written for the Undisputed Truth, who had a modest hit with it in early 1972.

The album was, Otis says, “a truly strange mix,” the balance of it being covers, such as of the Marvin Gaye–Tammi Terrell “Love Woke Me Up This Morning,” Roberta Flack’s “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” and Isaac Hayes’s “Do Your Thing.” There was an in-house plum, actually two, from Maurice King, the affable bandleader hired in the 1960s to polish the stagecraft of Motown acts. With the old master now down on his luck, Whitfield chose one song King had written with his son Evans, “I Ain’t Got Nothin’,” a doo-wop throwback on which Otis was given a rare lead. The other King song was a 180-degree turn. Called “Run Charlie Run,” it was a blistering parable of a white man’s flight to a “safe” neighborhood, for which the song upbraids him for not accepting black neighbors—“You are much too prejudiced to try; tell me why”—and mocks him, with a chorus that goes, “The niggers are coming! Run, Charlie, run!” Otis still cringes that he actually sang that line, at the order of Whitfield, “like a white man.”

“Norman,” he said, “you’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, we went through this,” Whitfield brushed him off. “This is how it goes.”

“We don’t want to be singing no shit about ‘niggers.’ It’s too much.”

But sing it they did—with Melvin’s overwrought recitation unwittingly comical. In time, the group would take much heat, from blacks and whites alike, for its inclusion. Humiliated by what Whitfield was asking of them, they appealed to Gordy, begging for a new producer and a new project, to no avail. And so they labored to complete the wacky album, the high point of which was the very serious “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone,” a tale of woe about backwoods lechery and family dysfunction, reliving the dead-end life of a sorry patriarch, a bounder much like the men Otis and Melvin had called daddy during fleeting moments of their childhood. In Strong’s lyrical narrative, a neglected son queries his weary mother, after he’s heard his father has died, about what kind of man he was. With head hung low and a tear in her eye, she sadly confesses, “Son, Papa was a rollin’ stone,” who lived by one rule—wherever he laid his hat was his home—and did little else but chase women and get drunk. In one of pop music’s greatest ever lines, she sighs, “And when he died, all he left us was alone.”

Unlike the usual Whitfield-Strong message songs, “Papa” told a clear and pungent story, in near *vérité* style, with unforgettable Tennessee Williams–like prose about the old rambler’s storefront preachin’ and

leechin,' propagating three children with another wife and stealin' in the name of the Lord. As hard to believe as it was that lyrics of this caliber could be submerged, Whitfield seemed to try. He made the tune another grande bouffe, with much help from arranger-conductor Paul Riser, whose strings and horns were the spine of the song.

On a cellular level, "Papa" was actually a rather simple number inflated to epic proportions. Its root figure was one basic chord progression repeated ad infinitum without variation or flourish. The track began in this trancelike fashion, with a metronomic one-two, one-two-three-four bass beat melded to a rat-a-tat high-hat cymbal, neither of which wavered an iota for the next eleven minutes, accented by a sexy, sinewy trumpet and stabbing strings. It pricked the ears into an almost bursting sense of expectation when after nearly two minutes Dennis finally broke in, with a quiet but ultra-intense gnarl of a vocal that began, "It was the third of September, that day I'll always remember / 'Cause that was the day that my daddy died," another rock epigraph for the ages, and around which in the Motown literature a too-perfect folktale would emerge—again, codified in *Temptations* and the ensuing TV movie based on it—that Edwards, upon seeing that line, had nearly assaulted Whitfield over the coincidence that his own daddy had died on the third of September, a fact Edwards accused Whitfield of intentionally using just to irk him. Whitfield, in this take, denied the charge but urged Edwards to "use that anger and passion" in his vocal.

It was a good story that got better each time it was told, even if some of it made no sense. For instance, as Edwards had known, the same line had been used in the original version of the song. Amazingly, it seems no one thought to ask Edwards about it, and so Otis's recollections about the incident would perpetuate one more Motown myth.

"Ah, well, they made too much of that angle. It wasn't that way," Edwards says now. "My daddy died on the third of *October*. I did mention this to Norman but only as a fact, like to say, you know, if it was October, that would be the day my daddy died. That was all there was to it."

Not the stuff of myth is that Whitfield did work Edwards to a frazzle, making him lay down his part at least thirty times, with the purpose to render his voice just tired and scratchy enough to unleash primal emotion, each syllable a quiet, mordant growl simmering with loathing

and lost innocence. Edwards sang with real anger and passion, as did all the Tempts—"five angry guys," as Otis puts it. But all the instrumentation swamped them, with around four minutes of pure hypnotic furor in the middle, four more again at the end, when horns blared in the same cyclical pattern and feverish handclaps and thudding bass drum syncopated the beat until the fadeout finally came.

There were memorable moments when Damon Harris earned his Temptations stripes with vocal flourishes virtually indistinguishable from Eddie. Richard also flourished on his breakout vocal, and Melvin's basso judgment of Papa's many indiscretions—"And *that* ain't right"—was indelible. Yet, as with the other material on the album, this overstuffed suite struck the group as something less than commercially feasible, and this time Whitfield would refuse to give much when it came to clipping it. The album cut ran nearly twelve minutes, a good half of it with not a word uttered as extended instrumental passages swirled around and around. For the single version, his take-it-or-leave-it final version ran nearly seven minutes, longer than any known single ever released, but because such length restrictions had loosened considerably in the 1970s, Motown indulged its resident temperamental genius and moneymaker.

"We fought tooth and nail not to record 'Run Charlie Run' and 'Papa Was a Rollin' Stone,'" Otis recalls, calling the latter "a fantastic song—for somebody else." He goes on, "We were goddamned sick of that kind of crazy song. We wanted to sing romantic ballads again. We felt we had begun to lose our audience with the crazy shit Norman was doing. The good thing was that we thought 'Papa' would be a failure. We almost were rooting for that, so we could go back to singing love ballads."

As it was, the sessions for "Papa" were so long and arduous that when it was finished in late June it just barely made it onto *All Directions* for its July release, too late to be the first single, the near disastrous "Mother Nature." But Whitfield once again found the end zone with a long pass, a very long one. Though it ran overlong for a single by any standard, when it came out in late September backed with a four-minute, forty-nine-second instrumental version, every second of it was utterly compelling, and eagerly played by both black and white stations, the FM stations giving their DJs very liberal bathroom breaks by playing the album cut a lot, by demand.

"Papa" rolled hard and fast to the top of the pop chart the week of December 2, making it the fourth Temptations record to go all the way, and also hit No. 5 on the R&B chart, good work for a song that could only broadly be called soul. After moving out "I Can See Clearly Now" and spending two weeks there, and twelve weeks in the Top 40, it had sold two million copies, the most ever by a Temptations single (and the fifth that would be retroactively, post-1977, given status as a gold record, with "My Girl," "I Can't Get Next to You," "Ball of Confusion," and "Just My Imagination," though Gordy's secretive accounting may have made it harder for others, like "Beauty Is Only Skin Deep" and "Cloud Nine," to be so certified in this manner). "Papa," nearly by universal acclamation, took home Grammys for Best Group R&B Performance and, for Whitfield and Riser, Best R&B Instrumental for the flip side. Whitfield and Strong also won for Best R&B Song.

The "Papa" monster was so big and bold that few could have imagined it would be the last song the Temptations would take to No. 1, and the second to last they'd take into the Top 10.

All Directions sprinted to the head of the R&B album chart, with "Papa" as its driver, soaring to No. 2 pop, No. 1 R&B. However, in the soul niche, it did not put the Temptations in the company of rising funk voices like Billy Preston, Parliament-Funkadelic, Confunkshun, the Ohio Players, and the still viable Sly and the Family Stone, and not quite distinctly in the romantic soul idiom they had done so much to cultivate before being carried downstream by acid soul—although the latter was where they were headed, back to the R&B niche, with a pinch of vinegar here, a dash of honey there. The rub was that "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" would keep them in human bondage to Whitfield. For how long they couldn't know, but for the foreseeable future the upshot was that only abject failure, it seemed, could break the yoke that on both sides had become something of a necessary evil.

Indeed, they must have looked with green envy at Barrett Strong, who after *All Directions* quit on Whitfield, believing that he too was completely overshadowed by the dominating Whitfield. Strong not only walked away from Whitfield but from Motown, signing a singing contract with Epic Records late in 1972, albeit with meager results.

Whitfield, meanwhile, basking in the universal huzzahs for “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone,” had a predictable response to Strong’s loss. Rather than hire another lyricist, he decided he could add that arrow to his quiver. Having convinced himself that the massive success of the record was due to his rhythms and visions, and only incidentally the vocals of the Temptations, he would carry on in the same vein but now with his own balladry, which would undoubtedly be perfect. It was just that kind of egomania that made life miserable for the Temptations, who even as *they* basked in the afterglow of “Papa” figured things were going to get worse. And they did. A lot worse.

Though not part of the Temptations’ ongoing journey, Paul Williams tried to hold on to the tenuous connection, even if only by his fingernails now. Forlornly, he would ring up Otis, Melvin, or Dennis and ask to be filled in on what was happening, but such vicarious gratification only made him feel less useful and more adamant that there was no good reason for his proscription, not even dire diagnoses from doctors or the recurring stays in hospitals.

Neither did Eddie help his shattered frame of mind; in fact he shamelessly exploited it. Rather than give Paul pep talks, Eddie, perhaps to ease his guilt that by exiting the group all he had left Paul was alone, bad-mouthed the Temptations, assuming the same “advisory” role that Ruffin had with him and filling Paul’s head with conspiracy theories such as that his enforced absence from the group was proof that Otis, with Melvin as his stooge, was trying to write Paul out of the group as payback for Eddie’s sedition. Even if Paul bought any of that, what Eddie didn’t seem to realize—or if he did, to care—was that Paul needed the Tempts, and needed to believe he would get back. Indeed, playing both sides, Eddie would sometimes call Otis and remind him not to forget about Paul.

Otis, who knew what Eddie was telling Paul behind his back, thought it was the height of arrogance and hypocrisy, and that Eddie was trying to cover his own butt should the worst happen to Paul. It hurt, then and still, that Eddie would accuse him of turning his back on Paul. “Look,” he says, his back up, “I was the one who insisted that Paul keep getting paid, to keep him on the payroll as a choreographer and a consultant, even though he really didn’t do anything with us. What did

Eddie do for him during that time, except bad-mouth us to him? See, it wasn't Eddie's responsibility, he was gone from the Temptations and in his mind that must have meant he didn't need to look after Paul. But that's what we had to do, and part of that was making sure he didn't go broke."

Paul was kept on the payroll at his usual one-fifth share of royalties (Street and Harris were put on a salary of \$400 per week, with small percentages of royalties on the songs they sang on), and the priority to keep him solvent took on real urgency when the IRS came after him in the early 1970s for \$80,000 in unpaid back taxes—proof positive that Shelly Berger wasn't blowing smoke about how Motown artists who hired outside accountants, as Paul had in recent years, found themselves up to their asses in tax trouble. In his depressed condition, it was another headache he didn't need. But it also underlined the bitter irony that while he never had much truck with Eddie and David's ravings about Motown bleeding them dry, and had had to talk Eddie down when he got all wound up about it, *he* was the one who now needed charity.

If he couldn't go out on the road, however, Paul saw no reason not to explore the possibilities of following Eddie and David and doing some recording of his own, and looking for any angle to do it. Early in 1973, Otis, Melvin, and Cornelius Grant had formed a production company, independent of Motown, called D.O.C., grooming a soul act called Swiss Movement and writing a song for them called "Take a Chance on a Sure Thing." Says Otis, "Paul came up to Southfield, where Melvin and I lived, and he heard a tape of it and pleaded with me to let him cut it instead. I told him, 'Paul, I can't, man. We got this deal with RCA for Swiss Movement. RCA's paying us to cut it.'"

For Paul, for whom such explanations had become common, and maddening, it was as if he were living out the very line he'd sung in "I Can't Get Next to You"—"The things I want to do the most I'm unable to do." With a look of hopelessness, he said something that Otis would never forget.

"I don't know, man, if something don't happen for me . . . you know, I been thinkin' about killing myself."

Otis goes on, "I'd never heard him say that before, never. But he was in such a bad way, he was blaming everybody, saying stuff like, 'Motown's still recording the Temptations, they're recording David, they're recording Eddie, but it's like they forgot about me.' And Melvin

and I just lit into him. I said, 'Get outta here with that shit about killing yourself. Listen, brother, just get your head together, you'll be all right.'"

It seemed he might be when Gordy allowed Paul to record some songs, perhaps hoping that if Paul had something like that to focus on and pump him up, he'd rebound and finally get himself together. There was no commitment, no promises, but for Paul it was good enough to begin writing songs with Eddie and go into the studio that spring with Motown producer Clay McMurray. He was clearly banking a lot on it, and his enthusiasm was a welcome relief. He even made an effort to lay off the booze and cigarettes. But given the long odds against anything ever coming of it, Otis didn't know if in the end Paul would be able to weather another disappointment. And so even as Otis tried brushing off the suicide threat, something didn't let him.

"I worried about him," he says. "I worried a lot."

David Ruffin had, within five years, gone from the cynosure of the Temptations to a nearly forgotten man. Things started going sour for him in 1971 when Motown screwed him. He'd cut his third album, *David*, a paste job of songs he had cut over the past few years, produced by Smokey Robinson, Ivy Jo Hunter, Hank Cosby, Johnny Bristol, Duke Browner, and Clay McMurray, that contained titles reading like personal invocations—"Each Day Is a Lifetime," "I Can't Be Hurt Anymore," "Let Somebody Love Me," "For the Shelter of Your Love," "Don't Stop Lovin' Me." But Motown killed the LP, choosing instead to put out four of its cuts as singles, none of which even charted, leaving him a virtual nobody in the eyes of the company for the next two years, when Motown got around to releasing another album, *David Ruffin*, in February 1973, without fanfare, promotion, or much in the way of sales.

Many of his friends told him he was dimming his own star by not moving with nearly everyone else at Motown to L.A., a move the Temptations were similarly reluctant to do but would have no other choice by 1975 when Motown officially shuttered 2648 West Grand Boulevard. But David would hold out, oddly, for those who knew him figured he'd have been the first one to go Hollywood. But La La Land, he seemed to know, would only multiply his jumble of insecurities.

Instead he floated to and fro wherever the wind and gullible women took him. He'd fly to the coast to record, then go back to any number of places—none being his own home. The last of those had been one he rented on Hazelwood Street in the well-to-do Highland Park section, until he came off the road one day to find his belongings on the sidewalk, having been evicted. Since then, he'd found his way to temporary lodging in the Parkside section of Detroit, a horse farm in rural Texas—his favorite locale, loving as he did to ride bareback for long idyllic hours, alone and not having to play the pimp—and in Philadelphia with a woman named Joy Hamilton, whom he would marry in 1976.

By sheer coincidence, it was also to Philly where the terminally sick Tammi Terrell had moved in 1969 to live out her life at her sister's home. By then, Ruffin had already moved in with another young and soon disposable squeeze in Detroit named Tonya. As Terrell's illness became known, he said almost nothing about her except to deny periodic rumors that she had died. While he was in Philly, he did not come to visit her so that there could be a sense of closure between them before her death on March 16, 1970, at age twenty-four, and he was unavailable to attend her funeral. Still, he grieved on some level—one of those levels he stored deep inside himself.

According to Tammi's sister, Ludie Montgomery, in a book published in Britain in 2005, *My Sister Tommie: The Real Tammi Terrell*, Tammi's last words were, "Take care of David." If that pitiful adieu got back to him, it may have cut through his heartless facade and wrapped around his inner being. His ex-girlfriend Genna Sapia recalled that when she briefly reunited with David after Terrell's death, she found tucked into a bedroom drawer of his Parkside place photos, letters, newspaper clippings, and other mementos of Terrell, many showing them together. When she asked him why he kept them, she said, he shooed her away, saying with the typical Ruffin surface coldness, "What're you worried about? She's dead." By no surprise, that reconciliation, like many others he would agree to, ended in violence, this time when he hit Sapia with a closed fist and the borrowed diamond ring he was wearing broke the bridge of her nose.

Ruffin craved women, and craved love more. But the gaping cavity of his soul could only be filled to his satisfaction by cocaine and loathing, mainly for Berry Gordy for keeping him a "slave" to Motown.

But how could that possibly jibe with the fact that he could have left Motown in 1972 when his contract expired but signed up for another four years? The answer was, it couldn't jibe, just as nothing else he ever said or did jibed with reality. Then too, for all his bluff and bluster, in the end he would usually take the safe way out. The only real essence of David Ruffin was that he was a coward.

But he still had a modicum of marketability, affording him the chance to keep recording and to show up every now and then on TV shows like *Soul Train*, where the audience revered him. He would sing new songs, but the electricity would only come when he would launch into the latest ritualistic rendition of "My Girl" or "Ain't Too Proud to Beg." He too was becoming a golden oldie. But it was better than nothing.

By contrast, Eddie was making meaningful contemporary music on his own. His second album, *People . . . Hold On*, recorded, à la Stevie Wonder, not with Motown musicians but with his own backup band from D.C., the Young Senators, was pitched as a concept album "dedicated to black America," dotted with African rhythms, gospel, soul balladry, proto-raps, and social pontificating such as on the Curtis Mayfield-like title track. But it was the funky dance grooves that made it fly, the eight-minute "Girl You Need a Change of Mind"—with Eddie cooing so winsomely that no woman could have objected to his avowal that "now I'm for women's rights, I just want equal nights"—becoming all the rage in the nascent New York discos. Indeed, some would anoint the record as the first disco song.

That Eddie, with Frank Wilson at the helm, could do disco better, and with a frothier touch than the Temptations, was clear in the LP's rise on the new dance charts, though neither the album nor its singles fared well as pop music. That situation changed dramatically on the follow-up, *Eddie Kendricks*, which rocketed to prominence on the tail of the quintessential disco anthem "Keep on Truckin'," a dizzying carousel of funk rhythms and tempos, buried within which was Eddie's smug retort to the Tempts for pricking him on "Superstar": "In old Temptations rain, I'm duckin' / For your love through sleet or snow, I'm truckin'."

What made the flip-off more satisfying to him was that the LP, when released in May 1973, blew up the charts, going to No. 18 pop

and No. 5 R&B and mandating a single release for “Truckin’” slated for August. For Eddie, the timing was a hoot, since the Temptations, faced with the impossible task of living up to “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone,” came up short with their next album, *Masterpiece*, though Whitfield believed the title would certify his genius. Indeed, not a soul at Motown failed to hear it as a Whitfield oratorio. He not only wrote every song but, again abetted by Paul Riser, drove the group deeper into the background. The title track ran a numbing thirteen minutes and forty-nine seconds, leaving room for only one other track on side one and just six in all. The final track, “Hurry Tomorrow”—an ironic title, considering—ran over eight minutes.

In truth, it was the group who injected juice into a format that had become a tad stale and fuguelike rather than live-wire funk-pop. Two cuts, in fact—the title track and “Plastic Man,” both primers of social survival, the first about “staying alive in the ghetto” and featuring an Otis rap, the other about “Smiling Faces”—type insincerity—sounded only a simple few notes removed from “Papa.” Another was called “Ma,” hashing a tale of backwoods motherhood. But the Tempts saved most of it, with Dennis and Damon giving a nervy edge to the breakneck disco beat of “Law of the Land.” Once more the Tempts sung through gritted teeth, feeling like props toward an end—big sales, the only attachment that seemed to matter to Motown.

And the album got those sales, almost as many as had *All Directions*. Released in late February 1973, *Masterpiece* zoomed to No. 7 and No. 1 R&B. The first single, the title track, released three weeks earlier with an instrumental version on the flip, racked up the exact same positions on the singles charts—but that would be their last sniff of that kind of rarefied air. Indeed, by early summer the air had gone musty when the second single, “Plastic Man,” barely reached the pop Top 40 while holding firm in the R&B Top 10. The last, “Hey Girl (I Like Your Style),” a traditional smooth soul ballad fronted by Richard, dropped in July, to do marginally better at No. 35 pop, No. 2 R&B.

“Keep on Truckin’,” meanwhile, went out a month later, with hard expectations that it would rise to a yeasty hit. *That* would be when Eddie’s riposte to the Tempts would have a sweet context.

However, as fate would have it, sweet as August would be, it was to taste just as bitter.

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Paul in early 1973 recorded two songs he and Eddie cowrote, the too-close-to-the-bone “Feel Like Givin’ Up” and “Once You Had a Heart,” which he intended as a potential B-side if “Givin’ Up” was issued as a single. He had cut back on the booze and cigarettes, and his voice was more robust if still a bit wobbly at times. Rehearsing, then seeing the rhythm track cut, he seemed to brighten, though he seemed daunted when he had to return to Motown for the vocal session.

“I was with him when he recorded those songs,” says Scrooney Williams, “and when Paul started to sing [in Studio A], he stopped and said, ‘Man, I can’t do it here.’ He just couldn’t relax. So he and Clay McMurray went over to this studio on Davidson, and he just sang the hell out of them. One time, the tape got screwed up or something and he had to sing it again. I didn’t think he could, but he said, ‘No problem,’ and nailed it again. We listened to the playback and everyone there was saying, ‘Man, this shit is hot!’”

Otis wouldn’t go quite that far, though upon hearing the tapes, he says, “I thought it sounded good. Paul did too, and he was always very critical.” The tapes went to Motown, which sat on them. By the early summer, word came that the record would not be released. “They scrapped it, killed it,” Scrooney says, “but what they were really doing was killing Paul. It was very hard for him to accept that after all the work he’d done. It was like, ‘What was the point, why’d I knock myself out for?’”

“That’s why all of us [in the family] have so much hatred for Motown. They didn’t see the human side of it. They wouldn’t release him so he could go somewhere else and record. I don’t even think they paid him anything for those records. They took money from *him* to pay for the sessions.”

By then, Paul had come over to Eddie’s way of seeing Motown as a bunch of bandits. Paul, too, now had compiled account books with money he swore he was owed. And like Eddie, he would storm into the now skeletal Motown office and try to get someone, anyone to pay up. “I remember those times,” Scrooney says, “because sometimes I’d be sitting in the car for hours while he was in there. Then he’d come out, empty-handed and cursing. He was at the point where he couldn’t take it anymore. He’d say, ‘Damn! My wife wants a divorce, the government’s after me, and them motherfuckers up there won’t pay me. God *damn* it!’”

Still, Scrooney heard nothing similar to what Otis says Paul confessed to him. "I was living with him. Paul wasn't talking about killing himself. He was in good spirits, he'd gotten back to recording, he knew he could still perform. He was getting himself back together. And Paul was a fighter, he wanted to show people he could do it." But with no more records to make and no more dreams to bank on, he was disconnected and adrift once again, and reached again for the bottle. Dennis, who had regularly dropped by to see how he was, tapered off, then stopped altogether, not able to bear what he saw.

"It was so difficult for me, so upsetting," he says. "So I tried to ignore it, like it wasn't really happening. Because I loved Paul, he was such a smart person, one I leaned on so much for support and how to do the moves. He was so talented, so cool, the last guy you'd have expected would be so lost. You just wanted to pretend he would get well and be back. We all did that, none of us wanted to face up to Paul being where he was. It was selfish of us, I know, but there was nothing we could do to help him because, let's face it, for whatever reason and whoever's fault, Paul got to where he didn't want to help himself."

As best as can be determined in what is still a hazy chain of events, it seems that Paul had moved back into his house after he'd gotten Mary pregnant during one of their periodic reconciliations. Their sixth child, a daughter named Mary Agnes, was born in the spring, leaving Paul to believe the reconciliation was permanent. However, he had begun drinking again and may have physically abused her, because after an argument she threw him out again. He then went back to Ronnie, buying her a new house on La Salle Boulevard. Weeks later, on August 16, he had finished moving his stuff in.

What happened after he awoke in the wee hours of Saturday, August 17, was and is shrouded in mystery. It's known that at around 1 A.M. Paul Williams was found by passersby in an alley near the corner of 14th and West Grand Boulevard that was used as a parking area for a Cadillac showroom owned by John Conyers before he was first elected to Congress in 1964. No one knows why he wound up there, but it is striking that it was roughly equidistant between the house on La Salle and Motown, some three blocks south of the former and three blocks east of the latter.

Clad only in a pair of flower-print swim trunks, Smut Williams's lifeless body lay sprawled on the asphalt under the open driver's side door of his blue Ford Maverick, which was a long way down from the canary yellow Corvette he used to have. A pool of blood had spread out under his head and a gun with a bullet missing from the chamber was lying a few feet away. An open bottle of alcohol was found to the left of the body.

Called to the scene, police pronounced him dead within the hour. There were no ear- or eyewitnesses, but based on all available signs the cops made a preliminary finding that it was a suicide. After running his driver's license and looking through other ID in his wallet, they traced his home numbers and called Mary, Ronnie, and his brothers.

Says Scrooney of the scarring moment when he found out, "I had gone with my girlfriend, who's now my wife, to a club that night, the Mozambique, and we partied until about 3 A.M. Saturday morning. When we got to her house, my brother Marvin, who was living in Ronnie's house—he fell in love with her daughter and they have a daughter together—called and said, 'Scrooney, Paul is dead.' I didn't want to believe him, I said, 'Man, you need to stop playin' and hung up. But he called back and he was crying. He said, 'Man, Paul is dead, for real, I ain't playin.' I heard people in the background screaming 'Oh my God!' so I knew it was the truth.

"I slammed the phone down, threw on some jeans, and started running to La Salle. When I got there, there were like a thousand people in front of the house, and inside, my other brother Rufus was in a rage, threatening anyone who said it was a suicide. He was screaming, 'There's no way in hell he killed himself—say it again and I'll kill you!' Everybody was scared shitless because Rufus was a bad dude, he was a ruthless con man who'd lived a life of crime, was in jail a lot. He was the total opposite of Paul but he loved him so much. He was crying, just wailing, like, 'I'm wanted in more states than you can count but Paul's dead and I'm not? It can't be.'

"I couldn't make sense of it, either. No one could. Why would he kill himself when he just bought a house? We were gonna celebrate that. And this is a guy who was gonna kill himself the same night? Come on."

Otis had the opposite reaction. He and Melvin at the time were in New York for Damon Harris's wedding when, he says, "Richard called

me in my hotel room and told me they'd found Paul dead over on 14th and West Grand the night before. And I just sank down on the end of the bed and said, 'Wow, he did it. Goddamn it, he went and did it.' I felt like someone kicked me in the gut.

"Because as much as I worried about Paul carrying through on his threat, you just didn't want to believe he would. Then, when it happens, you say to yourself, 'Why in hell couldn't I have done something, why couldn't someone have done something?' It tears you up—and still does. I don't know anyone who knew and loved Paul who didn't feel they let him down. It's something all of us have to live with."

Don Foster, the first Motown official to be notified, had also run through the dark streets to La Salle Boulevard in the middle of the night. When he got there, he recalls, Ronnie Langston, through tears, told him what had happened the last time she saw Paul.

"She told me all about it," Foster says. "She said that she and Paul had an argument, that she had been after him to stop drinking and was trying to clean him up but Paul wouldn't try and so they had it out. Then he grabbed his gun and said, 'I'm going out.'" The gun would have surely been worrisome, but Paul was known to pack heat most everywhere he went. Moreover, he had also made a habit of "going out" whenever he got overly frustrated or angry; he'd blow off steam at a bar or just drive around for a while, then come back home. Thus Ronnie expected the same drill. But this time was different.

"I think he may have been heading to Motown," Foster surmises, "and that he wanted to end his life there, in front of the place where he made so much history before everything went bad. But he never made it. I don't know, maybe he thought he wouldn't go through with it if he did, and there was no turning back."

An autopsy found that Paul Williams died of a single gunshot wound to the left temple, from a gun discharged at close range. However, there was a most unusual finding that deepened the enigma. Because he was right-handed, and the gun was indeed determined to have been held in his right hand when it was fired, it presented a riddle: the only way he could have shot himself in this manner would have been to awkwardly stretch his right hand across his body and around to the opposite side of his head, bend his wrist into a C shape,

and pull the trigger even though his control of the gun would have been problematic.

Why, people immediately began asking, hadn't he simply pressed the gun against his right temple and fired?

For the Williams clan, this has always been the "Rosebud" clue, not easily deciphered but looming over the case. It certainly seemed to confirm their gut feeling that Paul would never have pulled that trigger. But no other bits and pieces could be assembled into a tangible counter-scenario. For example, the gun had two rounds missing, which raised the possibility that someone else, a mugger, say, could conceivably have grabbed Paul's gun, fired a shot, missed, then fired again—except no other shell or bullet hole was around, meaning one could reasonably assume that Paul had previously fired the other shot, though no one could remember him ever doing so. Then too, Paul's wallet was still in his swim trunks, cash intact.

Scrooney Williams claims that the coroner's report was kept from the family and the public because there were other things in it that didn't add up.

"We couldn't get it for thirty years, they wouldn't release it to us," he says. "But then I went to a police lieutenant, a retired detective, Al Brooks, and said, 'Al, I gotta get this autopsy report,' and he brought it to me, God bless him. And when he did, he told me, 'Joe, I got some problems with this thing. I've been a detective for twenty-five years, I ran precincts, and I don't see how he could've killed himself.' One thing was Paul's blood alcohol level. Al said, 'Joe, .10 is drunk, real drunk, you can't even put your hand on your nose. Well, your brother's level was .19. How the hell could he have driven anywhere? And at .19, he couldn't have taken a gun and put it directly in the middle of his forehead and pulled the trigger. That's not selling with me.'

"And, see, that's another thing. That autopsy reports shows all the angles; and that's what it said, that it was right between his eyebrows, not the left side of his head. And the gun was found in his left hand! How could that be? To me, that sounds like someone put that gun there. I'd never known any of these things before, and so I told him, 'Al, I want to know exactly what happened to Paul. I don't believe he shot himself.'

These revelations would indeed be troubling, if true. However, some of his "findings" are simply not plausible. The fact is, the coroner,

while never releasing the report in full, did release his findings days after the incident, saying the wound was to the left temple and that the gun—found on the pavement—had been fired while held in Paul's right hand. Even so, Scrooney is adamant, going on, "I have found out a lot of things. I got my own theory, but I have to keep it to myself right now 'cause I have a project going, a movie about Paul and what really happened, and I gotta get backing for it."

But he does let slip what the plotline of that movie would be, one that draws on the oft-speculated but never proven rumors that Gordy owed his company to some silent partners who were nobody's idea of respectable.

"I'll say this," he says. "Paul was suing Motown to get the money he was owed and the gangsters were running Motown. You can put two and two together."

For two days, Paul's open casket was on view at Cole's Funeral Home, the mortuary next door to Motown, and an estimated twenty-five hundred people filed past it. On August 24, the funeral was held at the Tried Stone Baptist Church, which was overflowing with mourners. Outside, the streets were lined with both fans and people who came to gawk at the celebrities, who of course included the Temptations, past and present—but not Berry Gordy, who chose not to make the trip he hated back to Detroit. When the casket was brought to the church, the pallbearers were Eddie, David, Dennis, Melvin, Otis, and Cornelius Grant. All were racked with grief, but David was all but inconsolable. Having asked to sing Paul's signature stage song, "The Impossible Dream," he stood just feet from the open casket and began, but could only get halfway through it, his shoulders heaving as he sobbed, and when he nearly fell to his knees, the others rushed up, with Eddie grabbing him under the arms and raising him back up, and all of them, hand in hand, picked up where David left off. But they too dissolved into tears before they could finish and trailed back to their pews, with David unashamedly wailing, as was nearly everyone else in the church.

After the service, they once more carried Paul's coffin out to the hearse and got in, riding together beside the casket to Lincoln Memorial Park cemetery in Clinton Township, Michigan. At the gravesite the

casket was opened again, whereupon Eddie kneeled down and kissed Paul's face, his personal adieu to the childhood friend who had talked him into leaving Birmingham, swearing that they'd both be rich and famous one day. How long ago that seemed now.

The postscript of Paul's valediction was, as Paul had painfully learned, that being rich and famous offered little security. At the wake the day before, when David, Eddie, and Cornelius had gotten out of their car and were walking to the church, they were mugged by three thugs who targeted them because of their expensive suits. They were knocked down and David's leather bag was ripped from his shoulder and his jewelry from his fingers and wrist, though one of the muggers, not impressed with all of the ice, threw some back, sneering, "Here, you can keep this."

When the rites of mourning were over, Eddie gave an interview to the *Detroit Free Press*. While he managed to hold his tongue about who he considered the villain in Paul's demise—Berry Gordy—he implicitly admonished those who had gone on with their lives while Paul, as he said, "sat around on corners waiting for something to happen in his life," and that Paul being kept on the payroll "was only good enough to make him feel bad every time he looked up on the wall and saw all that gold." Trenchantly, he recalled how a week or so before when he saw him for what would be the last time, Paul grabbed his arm and told him, "Remember, man, you're only as good as your last show."

David did not go public with his grievances but, engulfed as he was by cocaine-fed paranoia about Motown, he was convinced that "they," as he put it, without needing to elaborate, had killed Paul, and not merely in the metaphorical sense. According to Genna Sapia, he "felt that Motown killed Paul as an example of what could happen to him and Eddie if they didn't toe the line." *Why* this would have been the case made sense only in his muddled mind but had to do with the fact that he and Eddie were "making lots of waves." Paul, in this animus, was taken out because he "was more valuable as a lesson than anything else. They had used him all up, and he'd become pretty much expendable at that point."

The mugging at Paul's wake, he maintained, was not happenstance; because his phone book had been stolen, Sapia went on, "David felt it

was a terror tactic,” that “they wanted to take away all his power via his phone book and terrorize him and Eddie into submission,” though what power he had by then was surely imaginary. Paul’s death, she said, took him “past scared,” into a state of mind that had him insisting, evidence notwithstanding, that there had actually been *two* bullet holes in Paul’s head, nullifying suicide and advancing his theories. To Genna, it was classic David Ruffin, whom as she knew well “had a talent for creating his own reality. If he wanted a thing to be true, in his mind it became true.”

Then too, subconsciously, David, like so many others, may have needed a way to believe that, as she said, “Paul’s death wouldn’t have been so obscenely wasted in an act as pointless as suicide.” But knowing him as she did, Sapia allowed, “Or maybe I’m just overestimating [him], big-time. Maybe he just said it for the drama.”

At that point, David certainly would have wanted Eddie to pose as an equal victim of Motown vengeance. But that was hardly possible once “Truckin’” soared to No. 1 on the pop and R&B charts in the fall and had been anointed by many as the prime mover of the disco wave. Eddie would score nearly as big with the follow-up, “Boogie Down,” which went to No. 2 pop and No. 1 R&B in early 1974. But tougher as it was for David to get into Eddie’s mind given his solo success and now that he was half a continent away living in L.A., he would warn him not to let his head get too inflated.

“Them people will never leave you the fuck alone,” Ruffin gofer Tony Turner quoted Ruffin telling Kendricks, again omitting the pertinent fact that he had chosen to stay at Motown. “They’ll find a way to get you. They’ll fire you and hold you to your contract; and if your contract says you got to do two albums a year, they’ll take you to the studio and record you two times a year, and then not release the albums.”

If such pettiness seemed inconceivable to Eddie in 1974, for David it sounded very familiar. After all, who had been more anointed than David Ruffin was in 1968? And just look where he was now.

Paul’s violent death symbolically ended the era that had brought the Temptations to prominence. While he had not been a part of the group for years, his ghostly presence in old films and tapes of their

performances was a grim reminder that much of what they were was now past tense, and that if those infectious songs and slicker-than-slick moves were timeless, there was something behind Paul Williams's sad eyes that made all the Temptations seem to wear metaphoric masks of tragedy. Not that it was unhelpful for business that the scent of something dark and tragic was in the air around them even as they were so relentlessly buoyant. Indeed, as they moved along on a path of many more twists and turns, anything that kept them tall, tan, titillating, and tempting—as opposed to just being there—would be more than welcome.

Shakey Ground

In late 1973 the Temptations followed Eddie to L.A. but found a short supply of creative juice in the sterile corporate digs on Sunset Boulevard that were close enough to the power-lunch crowd to make Gordy happy but only remotely attached to the changing cast of faces in the state-of-the-art studio and Plexiglas-lined office suites. “Everything was just so antiseptic,” says Otis. “Berry always used to say what made Motown was ‘rats, roaches, and love’ back in Detroit. Well, there was none of those in L.A., but neither was there that old family feeling everybody had for each other. It just seemed like all business. I’ll tell you one thing, man, it was a long way from West Grand Boulevard to Sunset Boulevard.”

Nor did La La Land bring any relief to the growing static between the Tempts and Norman Whitfield, which made for another hellish experience when they cut their next album, titled *1990*. The new shop, built to the dimensions of Studio A, could yield an entirely clean, technically flawless sound, but it lacked the old acoustic magic—and, of course, all but a few transplanted Funk Brothers, for whom L.A. was not to their liking. James Jamerson, for one, could not recreate the bold bass strokes of yesteryear and producers stopped calling him for sessions, which in the Temptations’ case were long, torturous, and testy even by Whitfield standards.

Whitfield's commitment to the group was also beginning to flag as he was becoming more and more involved with a self-contained eight-member L.A. band called Rose Royce, which had previously sung backup for Edwin Starr. On one 1990 track, Whitfield used them to bolster the backup on a song called "Let Your Hair Down," which he wanted to be the first single. It was a first for a Temptations record and one they resented. Then too, for all involved, the album posed a real challenge—keeping intact the old formula in a new Motown studio that lacked the gritty acoustics of Studio A. A further drag was that Whitfield either was getting a bit lazy with his Temptations material or the material itself had started getting derivative, a not altogether unexpected consequence given their success traversing so many idioms. Indeed, the remarkable thing was that it hadn't happened already, a credit to the inventiveness of both group and producer.

As it turned out, 1990 was a perfectly agreeable, at times brilliant, technically flawless product. The Temptations' classic white-glove soul flowed like ambrosia in the soothing ballad "Heavenly," fronted by Richard and Damon, and their peppery funk rolled on the dance-floor-aimed "You've Got My Soul on Fire"—which, as Eddie must have noticed, largely stole the groove of "Boogie Down"—and "Let Your Hair Down," which challenged "Mr. Businessman" to get dancin'. The title track, which never actually mentioned the year 1990, was more Whitfield social babble dressed in acid funk, updating "Ball of Confusion" to include "trouble in the White House," "job-less people walking the streets," and kvetching about spending money on the space race when the homeless "stare right in your face." The final track, "Zoom," was a fourteen-minute interplanetary acid trip, full of spaced-out Stevie Wonder-like synthesizers, tempo shifts, and rapped asides.

But the rub was that much of this, good and satisfying as it was, sounded something less than, well, fresh. Not only did it channel Eddie but the Temptations as well, with liberal samplings of "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," "I Wish It Would Rain," and other past works, even the count-off intro from "Ball of Confusion" that began "Let Your Hair Down." It was as if now a Temptations song had to be predictably unpredictable. That might explain why the chain of single releases from late 1973 to mid-1974—"Let Your Hair Down," "Heavenly," "You've Got My Soul on Fire"—slid on the pop charts from No. 27 to No. 43 to No. 74, and on the R&B from No. 1 to No. 8.

The LP, meanwhile, did reasonably well, coming in at No. 19 pop, No. 2 R&B, but there would be much hand-wringing by the group that Motown screwed up the promotion of the singles. The main gripe had to do with Motown president Ewart Abner. When “Heavenly” was nominated in 1974 as best R&B song by the American Music Awards, the second year of Dick Clark’s lowercase alternative to the Grammys, its winners chosen by music buyers instead of industry brahmins, the Tempts were on tour and Abner accepted on their behalf when they won. But in his speech he apparently forgot to say how much he appreciated American DJs—a gaffe according to the protocol of the times, one that led Otis to recall that “I almost died” as he watched on TV, fearing that in response they would take it out on the Tempts by not playing their records. This explanation, however, is a little too facile, overlooking that Gordy could have gotten all the play he needed, as he always did, for really marketable songs, something the current bunch of Tempts records were definitely not.

In any case, without the balm of massive hits, the chasm between the Tempts and Whitfield was now beyond repair, and the group once more implored Gordy to assign them a new producer. While they had his ear, they also requested that he allow them to form their own publishing company for songs they would write for future albums, a modest request to be sure since almost none of the group’s own songs were ever used, but one that Gordy, for whom publishing rights were as precious as gold bullion, rebuffed, in no uncertain terms. As Otis says, Gordy became so enraged at the thought of sharing even minor song publishing rights that “we could see spittle forming at the corners of his mouth. We’d never seen him as angry.”

But Gordy did relent on the producer issue, likely because he knew Whitfield was a goner at Motown anyway, his immersion in the affairs of Rose Royce having gone hand in hand with his yen to follow Holland-Dozier-Holland and branch out with his own label. By the end of the year, that had happened, with the unveiling of Whitfield Records. Its first big act would be the Undisputed Truth, whom he took with him from Motown, though its first big score would be the soundtrack to the 1976 flick *Car Wash*, spawning huge hits for Rose Royce with the title track and “I Wanna Get Next to You.”

The Temptations’ new producer was an old ally, Jeffrey Bowen, who with Frank Wilson had coproduced *The Temptations in a Mellow*

Mood album of pop standards before following Holland-Dozier-Holland out the Motown door, doing some producing for them at their Invictus and Hot Wax labels, mainly with the Chairmen of the Board. With him now back in the Motown fold, the transition and sifting of material took most of 1974. It was January 1975 before the next album, *A Song for You*, was in the can. The Tempts actually worked out much of it at Gordy's palatial Malibu Beach house, and for that reason Gordy took a coproducer credit. But neither he nor Bowen could produce, or reproduce, much of the Whitfield magic. What's more, working with the prickly Bowen did something they thought was impossible—it made them pine for Norman Whitfield.

Differentiating between the two, Otis says, "Norman became kind of a monster, but like when we kibbitzed and shit, he knew us, he grew up with us. We could give each other hell, then it'd fade and we'd go to work. Our disagreements with Norman were strictly professional. But with Jeff, when we worked with him before he was a nice young man who was just happy to be there and treated us like royalty. But now he was really dislikable. He didn't know how to handle people. He would just act like an asshole and a bully, constantly tearing into us—'You ain't doin' it! That ain't no good!' How the hell was that gonna help things? Those were some of most miserable moments of my career."

It even affected his health. One day, Bowen didn't realize his microphone in the booth was open and was heard over the intercom whining, "If I was still working with the Chairmen of the Board and not these guys I wouldn't have to put up with this shit." Otis, his ears burning, pivoted and headed for the booth to "kick that little motherfucker's ass," but was held back. That night, he began shaking uncontrollably. Taken to the hospital, he was told by a doctor that his nerves were shot, and for a time he was on tranquilizers. Again faced with an open Temptations rebellion over their producer, Gordy called a meeting, at which Bowen promised to back off.

"You better," Otis told him, "'cause if you don't I'm gonna clean your plow."

With those ground rules in effect, *A Song for You* was finally completed, and was, remarkably, a coherent, stylish piece of classic 1970s soul, with contributions by the Commodores and the core of a new killer rhythm section, with Melvin "Wah Wah" Watson on guitar, Ollie Brown and James Gadson on drums, Donald Baldwin on sax and keyboards,

ex-Parliament-Funkadelic bassist “Billy Bass” Nelson, and guitarist Eddie Hazel. The writing now was a potpourri, with the title track, a sensuous ballad by rock legend Leon Russell, already much covered by acts as diverse as Donny Hathaway, the Carpenters, Cher, Peggy Lee, and Andy Williams. Bowen cowrote three with Baldwin; one, “Shakey Ground,” with Hazel; and another, “Happy People,” with Lionel Richie. In fact, there was a distinct Commodores feel to the work. “Happy People” had been written originally for the prime Motown funk band, who sang in the background on the track, and the horns and strings were arranged by James Anthony Carmichael, who also produced the Commodores and Richie’s later solo career.

Breaking from Whitfield, the album’s mood was merrier, its beats more slamming, and the funky guitars more garrulous in the chain of hip-bumping funk of “Happy People”—which commenced with the precept, “Brothers, sisters, come and take my hand!”—“Shakey Ground,” and “Glasshouse,” and with the smooth R&B of “Memories” and “Firefly.” Significantly, given the Temptations’ new thirst for publishing rights to their material, one cut, “I’m a Bachelor,” listing all five of them as the writers, made it onto the album. Refreshing indeed was that none of its nine tracks either pontificated or preached, and only one, the melodramatic “Memories,” ran anywhere near long at just over six minutes. The biggest change, though, was that Dennis was now undeniably the frontman, monopolizing most of the leads.

It wasn’t on quite the same level as Stevie or Marvin, or the Commodores for that matter. In fact, it sounded less Motown than the Gap Band, the Ohio Players—or Rose Royce. But it solidified their place on the contemporary R&B charts and made a marginal improvement on the pop. For Otis, despite the agita, “it’s still my favorite record.” The LP’s three singles—“Happy People,” “Shakey Ground,” and “Glasshouse”—all made Top 40 pop and Top 10 R&B, with the first two hitting No. 1 R&B back to back, the first time they’d turned that trick since “I Wish It Would Rain” and “I Could Never Love Another (After Loving You).”

That was damn impressive, and pretty much the best that could be expected of them at a time when even their massive two-record, forty-one-track compilation album, *Anthology*, released in early 1973, did little business, going to No. 65 pop, No. 5 R&B. At best, then, post-Whitfield they were still congruent with the times and a reliable draw

on the hustings, liable to be found at highly visible venues—and still all over the tube, making guest shots on *Soul Train*, *The Midnight Special*, and the variety shows hosted by Sonny Bono and John Davidson. They were also VIP guests at the Ali-Frazier “Thrilla in Manila” heavyweight title fight on October 1, 1975, before which they were invited back to Ali’s dressing room, where the champ, who had known them since 1964, said he was nervous and asked for a rendition of “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” to get him loose. After the fight, they were feted by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos at the presidential palace. Otis, eschewing protocol, took Marcos’s dragon-lady wife Imelda for a spin on the dance floor. That Marcos had the country he and his wife were looting under martial law didn’t seem to matter. “Hey, I didn’t know what the deal was with the political situation,” he says. “She was a good-looking lady, man.”

But with the Temptations, it seemed that no good deed or run of luck went unpunished. For months, Damon Harris, who like Bowen had once been so overly solicitous to his elders, also became a drag and a pain in the ass. During the *Song for You* sessions, he’d even crossed Gordy, who while producing “Glasshouse” asked him to “turn it up, gimme some gusto.” Unmoved, Harris begged off, saying with a yawn, “Hey man, I’m tired.” Furious, Gordy told Otis, “I don’t like his attitude. Get rid of him.” With tour dates ahead, Harris was safe for now. But at an Apollo Theater date, he took the microphone and thanked the hard-boiled Harlem audience for, as Otis recalls him saying, “making it possible for us to buy these fine mink coats and beautiful cars and homes and diamonds.” Stunned at this arrogance, the other Tempts wondered if they’d get out of the building alive that night. When they got back home, it was curtains for Damon Harris.

The newest spare part became a high tenor from D.C., Glenn Carl Leonard, who had recorded for Atlantic with a group called True Reflection until they broke up, leaving him free. After an audition, he was thrown right into the frying pan as the newest Eddie Kendricks ersatz, a role he was so nervous about that before his first live show he broke out in hives.

They had survived yet another personnel shuffle, but what Motown did while they were on the road gave them all hives. Because they were absent so long from the studio, the company needed to

release an album lest the momentum of *A Song for You* dissipate. The result was *House Party*, a hash of tracks either done recently or pulled from the shelf. There actually were some gems on it, the centerpiece, “Keep Holdin’ On,” written and produced by Brian and Eddie Holland, and two songs penned by the Temptations, “What You Need Most (I Do Best of All)” and “Darling, Stand by Me (Song for My Woman).” Two others were produced by Steve Cropper, the long-serving guitar legend at Stax and mainstay of Booker T and the MGs, “Johnny Porter” and “Ways of a Grown-Up Man,” the latter with a superb lead vocal by Melvin. These curios aside, much of the older material, such as a cover of Bobby Womack’s “Can’t Stop a Man in Love,” were attempts to copy Whitfield’s earlier slick funk and overstylized ballads.

However, when Otis heard the tapes while the group was performing in the Netherlands, not even the fact that “Darling, Stand by Me,” which slyly snuck in a mild reggae beat, featured his very rare lead vocal, mollified him. He later wrote in *Temptations* that *House Party* was “a totally bogus album” and that “Motown was slinging out a mismatched collection of, pardon my French, shit.” Released in early November 1975, the LP made Top 40 pop and No. 11 R&B, but its solitary single, “Keep Holdin’ On” came in at No. 54 pop, No. 3 R&B charts, middling enough for Otis to pronounce the whole project a flop, one that they were almost happy about, if it meant Motown had learned its lesson not to put out substandard Temptations fare.

The redeemer would be their *real* next album, *Wings of Love*—or so they thought. But they once again faced the Jeffrey Bowen predicament. As if trying to one-up Whitfield’s having implemented Rose Royce to sing backup before, the unrepentant Bowen employed outside singers to do the same on most of the tracks—while at the same time choosing not to invite any other Temptation to the studio except Dennis. His explanation was that the album was running late and that was the quickest way to get it done, but could he have really cut out four-fifths of the Temptations on much of their own album without being intentionally disrespectful to them? Even if the vast majority of fans wouldn’t know the difference, it seemed like chutzpah of the highest degree and a mortal insult that mocked the Temptations’ brotherhood.

Moreover, Bowen couldn’t help but betray his true motives when he sidled up to Dennis one day and was overheard by Otis telling him,

“You don’t need to be with those guys,” that he could be “bigger on his own,” and that “I can cut you into things.”

Edwards concedes it was a grievous mistake to sing without the others, and is plenty contrite about it. “What happened was, we were mad at Jeff, and Jeff was mad at us,” he says. “So he was using me as a wedge, and I should have seen that. I’m sorry I didn’t, that I didn’t say, it’s all or none of us” But neither can he deny that Bowen put in his head ideas of going solo. As a result, though the others didn’t know it yet, he was now on the clock.

To be certain, the album would whet many a soul buff’s appetite for the guest appearance of the now somewhat dimmed Sly Stone as a collaborator, brought about because his sister Rose had been recently signed by Motown, and also was to be produced by Bowen. Sly, Bowen, keyboard player Truman Thomas, and songwriter Jimmy Ford cowrote three exuberant horn- and synth-heavy funk tunes, “Up the Creek (Without a Paddle),” “Sweet Gypsy Jane,” and “China Doll,” all of which included Sly on organ and Clavinet and his brother Freddie on guitar and bass—though because of his own tax problems Sly begged off a writer’s credit, apparently to keep the IRS in the dark. But aside from curiosity, these tracks, bundled on the A-side of the LP, lacked melodic witchery, and Bowen’s ballads on the B-side were rather lugubrious filler. And of course, there was the matter of there being only one Temptation on all but one track, “China Doll,” which gave Richard the lead.

Gordy, who oddly did not object to this bizarre turn, even more oddly liked what he heard on the tapes. Otis didn’t, not only for the underwhelming content but because it sounded to him like a Dennis Edwards solo album, and that without their distinctive supplemental harmonies and especially Melvin’s signature bass, it was anything but a Temptations work. “It ain’t gonna do nothing,” he told Gordy, who nonetheless put it out and learned Otis was right. *Wings* did better than the accursed *House Party*, going Top 30 pop and No. 3 R&B, but the “new direction” was pretty much in a circle. For Bowen, that meant the clock had run out. As soon as the album was gone, so was he; and rather than submit them to another would-be Whitfield or Bowen, Motown agreed that from here on in the Temptations would produce themselves. At least that way, Gordy believed, they would stop complaining. But he would be wrong.

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Rather than a celebrated milestone, the first—and, as it turned out, last—self-produced Temptations album was instead a project doomed to failure. This was because by the time it was recorded, in the late spring of 1976, they had in effect given their notice to Motown, leaving the company with every reason to ignore it.

Nothing like that was expected by Motown when their contract came up for yet another renewal that year. But neither did Gordy expect the defections of the Jackson 5 or Marvin Gaye. However, Gordy had put his lawyers in charge of things like contract negotiations, with an arrogance that, says Otis, “made us feel like children, like we weren’t smart enough to see for ourselves what was happening.” Thus they were taken aback when the Temptations’ lawyer, Abe Somers, confronted them with what he said was \$300,000 in unpaid royalties. Because Somers had made similar claims on behalf of other Motown artists in the past, Barney Ales, Gordy’s longtime adjutant, sputtered to Otis, “Get rid of him! I’m sick of this Abe Somers.”

His having struck a nerve, the Tempts stood by Somers, who drove too hard a bargain for the company to buy, leading Otis to notify the office that they too were leaving Gordy’s dysfunctional “family.” He did so impetuously, not knowing what kind of offers would be out there for them from other labels. But the decision was final, and according to Otis about more than mercenary matters. Indeed, when Gordy inquired what kind of bread it would take to keep them, Otis told him that it was more about dignity and respect, that they weren’t kids anymore and needed more sway. Gordy listened, nodded, and agreed that Ales was out of line and owed them an apology. “But he never gave us one,” Otis notes. “So that kinda said it all.”

What was left was how to abrogate the two years left on their contract, and that Motown owned all rights to the Temptations name. And on both counts, Gordy was surprisingly accommodating. He held them to just one more album and ceded rights to the name to Otis and Melvin—the signed document to that effect still hangs framed on Otis’s wall. It was possible, too, that Gordy may have hoped that for his largesse the Tempts would forget about the \$300,000.

And so the album in progress, titled *The Temptations Do the Temptations*, would be their farewell to Motown, and even though playing up that angle might have delivered handsome sales, Gordy and

his minions saw no upside in promoting a group who was out the company door as soon as it was finished. Which was a pity, since Otis calls it one of his favorite albums, no doubt in part because the group—listed on the production credits as Tall “T” Temptations, the name of their new production company—called the shots, aided by Suzee Ikeda, a sometime Motown singer who was similarly a novice on the board, and arranger Benjamin Wright.

The results were certainly no worse than with Bowen, the snappy funk recalling the analgesic string-stirred disco pop of the Spinners, especially on its only single, the group’s own “Who Are You (And What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life)” and “There Is No Stopping (Til We Set the Whole World Rockin’).” Leonard had a strong presence, with lofty Kendricks-like leads on the romantic ballad “Is There Anybody Else” and the disco “I’m on Fire (Body Song),” as well as his shared lead with Street on “Why Can’t You and Me Get Together.” But even before the work was finished, producing was too much to handle, and Motown staff writer and HDH protégé Michael L. Smith, who wrote “No Stopping,” came in to run the session for that and several other tunes. Still, they figured they’d made their point.

Not that many would know it. Knowing that the lack of promotion would sink the album, the group was content that it managed to hit No. 53 pop—the first LP not to break the Top 40 since their debut album in 1964—and No. 10 R&B. “Who Are You” only made it onto the R&B, at No. 22, in November 1976. It was hardly going out with a bang, and worse still was that it would be another year before they would have anything new to put out.

The final act at Motown was, to Gordy’s consternation, following through on that \$300,000, for which they filed suit to recover. As Melvin would later recall, he and Otis served the papers themselves, insisting with Melvin-like embellishment that they had to do it because “to my knowledge, no marshal could get up to his estate.” When they got there, they sat in the car for half an hour summoning up the nerve to bite the hand that had fed them for two decades. So Gordy would indeed have to fight them on the matter, counterclaiming that they owed *him* at least as much in advances that were never earned back, something he had been willing to overlook until they came after him. As with Holland-Dozier-Holland, this case would end with a quiet settlement in Gordy’s favor. As always.

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Their search for a new label became tougher when, with atavistic reliability, Dennis became all too much like his hero David Ruffin. Starting in the mid-1970s, his use of cocaine went from recreational to obsessive, with predictable consequences when he regularly began missing rehearsals and team meetings, and became a pain to deal with—so much that he actually was fined for his screwups more than Ruffin ever had been. It may well have been that drugs were only part of these events; it seemed that the seed planted by Jeffrey Bowen had bloomed, with Dennis quietly approaching Motown about going solo, and it may have occurred to him that this could be more easily accomplished if he got himself booted from the Temptations. He will only admit now that he had become turned inside out by money.

Because his voice afforded him a vehicle to do something Otis and Melvin couldn't, he lost sight of the bigger picture, and of the fact that they had been very generous to him, giving him an equal share of royalties and tour profits. Conversely, all subsequent additions to the group would work on salary, usually no more than \$400 a week, and no royalty compensation until Leonard was cut in. (Paul's estate received continuing royalties, as of course did Eddie and David for their past work.) But all that counted for Dennis was the assumption that 100 percent was better than 20 percent. That math, of course, was what drove Eddie away, though the fact that he still wasn't rolling in dough meant it was no sure bet.

Dennis was already effectively gone from the Tempts when Otis decided he had enough of what he generalizes as his "nonsense" and his "intolerable attitude." When he told him he was fired, Dennis was already dickering with Motown over a solo contract but getting nowhere. This was Motown, after all, where even a titanic hit hadn't made Eddie Kendricks much in the pocket and only Stevie Wonder succeeded. Wanting not to delay his solo debut, Dennis went ahead to record an album while the negotiations went on—not the brightest move, something that became clear when after he finished it there was still no contract and thus the album was killed. Now, with nothing to sell and no way back to the Temptations, all he could do for money was to go work for his uncle in Cleveland, laying down concrete driveways, his

audacious dream of being another Teddy Pendergrass lost in the cement under his feet.

Remarkably, losing another lead singer did not kill or even much affect the flow of interest shown in the Temptations by other record houses. In a typically fast turnaround, they hired as Edwards's replacement a twenty-four-year-old baritone, Louis Price, and moved right on sifting through the offers on the table. The most "tempting" of them came from CBS Records after the Temptations entered into a verbal agreement with Philly International founders Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff to produce them as a moonlighting project, as they had for the label with the Jacksons (Gordy still owned the name of the Jackson 5). It seemed a marriage made in soul nirvana. But when Gamble and Huff reneged, so did Columbia, and the Tempts signed a four-year deal with Atlantic, the hoary soul and rock bastion of its garrulous founder Ahmet Ertegun, who had assembled a range of top-shelf acts from Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones to Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett.

Triumphantly, Atlantic, which seemed to have limitless resources, threw a party for them at Studio 54. Ertegun also had no problem allowing the Tempts to retain publishing rights to songs they wrote, which would be administered by their new company, Tall "T" Temptations Music. They also had a new and powerful manager, Sid Seidenberg, with Shelly Berger having elected not to jump with them from Motown.

They finally got back to recording under the aegis of Gamble and Huff protégés Ron Baker, Norman Harris, and Earl Young, who'd helped carve the Philly International sound as the core of MFSB, the Philly equivalent of the Funk Brothers who backed and sometimes produced hits by the O'Jays, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, the Spinners, the Stylistics, and the Trammps, and had their own hit with "TSOP," heard to death as the *Soul Train* theme. In 1975, when the Trammps signed with Atlantic, Baker-Harris-Young came with them and produced the dance anthem "Disco Inferno." When assigned the Temptations album, they went for material to Philly singer-songwriter Ron Tyson, whose high tenor on the demos was the closest thing to Eddie that Otis had ever heard.

Tyson cowrote all but two of the nine tracks on the LP, *Hear to Tempt You*, which hinted at and was promoted a historical merger of the Motown and Philly soul orbits yet came out as merely a stew of trite disco and slow-jam soul-funk. Playing it safe, too safe, Ron Baker, the primary producer, unleashed no bold Whitfield-like strokes; instead, nothing trenchant broke through the gooey Gamble-Huff-style strings that bathed each track. Glenn Leonard's fey leads on rosy ballads like "Can We Come and Share in Love" and "Let's Live in Peace" were affecting but not up to Tyson's gritty, smoky demo vocals, and Price couldn't hold the floor on the hard-thumping numbers like "Snake in the Grass" the way Dennis had, while another fine Melvin lead on "I Can Never Stop Loving You" went overlooked. While Baker didn't seek to temper the Tempts' traditional harmonies as Bowen had, neither did they leave any bite marks. The two released singles, "Think for Yourself" and "In a Lifetime," were dismal flops, confined to the middle and lower ends of the R&B chart, while the LP only found its way to No. 113 pop, No. 38 R&B early in 1978.

If anything was learned about what went wrong, it was a moot point when Baker, Harris, and Young split for heavier funk pastures at Harris's new Gold Mind label. Having gone the Philly route, the Tempts put the next album—which would determine whether or not Atlantic would extend their deal—in the hands of old friends, Brian and Eddie Holland, who would write and produce, and Paul Riser, who would do the arranging. Thus the Temptations' new horizon suddenly looked a lot like the old horizon—but without the old Motown Midas touch.

The Hollands tried the Bowen approach, jamming the Tempts into the slick mainstream funk perfected by the Ohio Players, Billy Preston, and Stevie Wonder. However, the LP, *Bare Back*, stretched the soup pretty thin, with even less meat than *Tempt You*, and did about the same on the market, its two singles, "Bare Back" and "Ever Ready Love," trapped in the middle of the R&B chart late in 1978. Though the Tempts recorded a third LP, produced by the Trammps' Ron Kersey, who wrote "Disco Inferno," it would become detritus since by then it had been mutually agreed by the group and Atlantic that the diversion there was a classic mismatch. As had Gordy, Atlantic let them go with two years left on their contract.

Now what? As the Tempts saw it, Gordy may have been in many ways the devil, but he was *their* devil, the only music arbiter who had an

instinctual perception about what would keep them relevant, even if not as chart-toppers anymore. Their expatriation, they determined, a bit late in the game, was a grievous error. Now the trick was how to rectify it.

However, they didn't leave Atlantic until after Kenny Gamble had posed a crazy notion—getting Eddie, David, and Dennis back in the Temptations. Otis had no reason to think it would ever happen—or that it could or should—but he and Melvin flew to Philadelphia, as did the prodigal Temptations, for a meeting in Gamble's office. There, Gamble asked them if they'd commit to a reunion if he could get them all signed and Atlantic to commit. Though the air hung thick with tension, they did so. But when Gamble couldn't work out the details, the "reunion" germ died. Still, as much as Otis wanted not to even think about it ever happening, he kept it filed away in the back of his mind.

Emblematic of the Temptations' survival instinct was an incident on a West Hollywood street one autumn day in 1978. Melvin had moved with his wife, Kim, and their children to an apartment on King's Road in West Hollywood near Otis, who was now divorced from Ann and had made room in his home for a new woman named Arleata, whom he would marry six years later, and her young daughter, Elan. On that day, Melvin went to have his hair styled at a local salon. After returning to his car, he started it up, then saw a woman friend leave the salon. When he went back to walk her to her car, leaving the motor running, a guy on the street jumped in to Melvin's car, put it in drive, and began to pull away.

Acting on pure anger and adrenaline, Melvin ran back to his car, leaped into the passenger seat, and tried to pull the key out of the ignition, whereupon the carjacker pulled a gun out of his belt and fired twice, hitting Melvin in the hand and the leg. Amazingly, as Melvin was grabbing at his bleeding leg and pleading for his life, the guy apparently recognized the uniquely deep voice as that of Melvin Franklin of the Temptations, and instead of shooting again he pushed Melvin out of the car and sped off.

For a few terrible minutes, yet another Temptation lay in a cold street, lead in his body, blood gushing from him. But unlike Paul Williams, Melvin caught a break—two, actually, if he was right in saying later that the only reason he was allowed to live was because he was a Temptation. The wounds weren't serious and would heal in time,

though his recovery forced him to miss a European tour by the group, with Otis taking the bass parts.

If Melvin was fortunate this time, he was pushing his luck in a broader time frame. Because such lucrative and punishing touring had become the lifeblood of the Temptations, he had, like Paul, refused to deal with his worsening physical condition, the biggest problem being something that had been diagnosed back in 1968 when he woke up one morning during a tour stop in Louisville, Kentucky, and couldn't move his arms or legs. Taken to a hospital, he was diagnosed with chronic rheumatoid arthritis. He quickly recovered feeling in his limbs and from then on dealt with the worsening pain and inflammation in his joints by having doctors give him cortisone shots, allowing him to go on performing but only temporarily masking the problem. In time, he began doubling up on the shots, ignoring doctor's orders to give up those strenuous stage maneuvers and rest his body.

Like Paul, too, the logic of recuperation paled compared to the need to perform, without which there was nothing to life. Whether or not he knew that he was slowly killing himself—the cortisone itself was perilous, weakening his organs and immune system—by the late 1970s his joints were so stiff he couldn't stretch his fingers out, his knees would swell to the size of melons after shows, and he had diabetes. But Otis, seeing him physically crumbling, couldn't bring himself to order Melvin off the road. Having done that with Paul, he just could not bear the thought of another Temptation losing his will to live. Then too, with the group struggling for its life, there was too much at stake to try to survive without another original Temptation.

Beyond the comforts and necessities of treading roads they'd been down for two decades—and new ones, such as through Africa in the early 1980s—there were realities to take stock of. By now the entrails of disco had begun to split into less distilled and more rigorously ethnic avenues in the 1980s, in hip-hop and rap, leaving the old-timers even farther out in the wilderness. That included Norman Whitfield, whose brief turn as a record company honcho was so tethered to disco that when it declined, Whitfield Records went under. Norman, after the example of the Hollands, had had to accept Gordy's big-hearted offer to return to Motown as a hired gun, to reunite with the Tempts on a one-off basis in

1983. But the “Silver Fox” who once ruled the soul galaxy—all anyone had to do was ask him—was now just another has-been begging for work.

After the Atlantic debacle, so too were the Temptations. Not yet forty and not ready for the scrapheap of oldies shows in the sticks, they agreed that they needed to make peace with Motown. Fortunately, it made sense for Gordy too, now that his music roster was in effect Stevie Wonder. When Smokey Robinson, acting as a go-between, arranged a meeting at Gordy’s mansion, the Tempts played it cool, not letting Gordy see how desperate they were. Otis, swallowing hard, reiterated that things would have to be different than before, adding, “I have felt from time to time that you did not like me.” His nerve seemed to impress Big Daddy, who stamped the rapprochement as done with one sentence—“Okay, let’s get to work.”

And so home they came, with an added benefit—Dennis Edwards, who groveled for his job back. Otis now had to admit that the Atlantic disaster had proven how much Dennis was needed. That left Price odd man out, though not many had known he’d ever been there at all.

The exiled Temptations *everyone* knew seemed to have little place in the emerging eighties rock cast. Eddie had kept on truckin’ through most of the seventies, living inside the R&B Top 10 and the pop Top 40 with hits like “Son of Sagittarius” in 1974, “Shoeshine Boy” in 1975 (a No. 1 R&B and Top 20 hit), and “He’s a Friend” in 1976. But after four more singles were shut out on the pop chart (though one of them, “Intimate Friends,” would be recycled in 2005 on the Alicia Keys hit “Unbreakable”), he blamed Gordy—who couldn’t win for losing with Eddie—for having strapped him into the same repetitive formula. Now David’s old words rang true for him; the time *had* come when Gordy, by owning them, was destroying them, and relishing it.

By 1978, after nine solo albums, he wanted out. The final straw was when Eddie cut his last Motown album, *He’s a Friend*, and chose as the cover an image of two clasped male hands, one black, one white, clearly in symbolic racial solidarity. But Gordy, who still operated in a sixties time warp, fretted that the public would see it as homoerotic, aware that rumors of homosexuality had swirled around Eddie for years—as they did with David Ruffin. Gordy let the cover stand after Eddie went to the mat for it, but he would not do a thing for the LP. And yet, playing into Eddie and David’s conspiracies, he was loath to let Eddie out of his contract. Eddie would later claim—again with likely overstatement—that

Gordy even had him confined for a time to a hospital psychiatric ward. As Eddie apparently saw it, though he didn't really say, the point of this was to make him doubt his own sanity.

In the end, he wound up having to buy his way free of his contract by giving up all future royalties, then signing with Arista Records, where, as the Temptations had learned, leaving Motown was no ticket to ride. After two albums and three singles stiffed, he'd be on the move again in 1981, to Atlantic, and to more failure. During this descent, whispers grew into open talk that Eddie Kendricks was losing his nectarous voice, that decades of chain-smoking had taken a profound toll, the indicators being his endless coughing and wheezing. In most of the songs he recorded the falsettos were limited, needing multiple takes to get it right, and were often traded for a new "mature" midrange tenor, as the promotional materials said.

Something certainly seemed not right about him. After numerous reconciliations with his wife, Pat, she had left him for good and he'd moved back to Birmingham, where he lived much like a hermit, rarely leaving his home, as if hiding out from the cruel world.

Ruffin, meanwhile, would emerge from his own drug-clogged ennui only briefly to record. His voice too was being damaged by cigarettes, booze, and his now favorite poison, the new scourge of freebase cocaine. He had one last hit in 1975, after hooking up with another of those heralded Philadelphia producers, Van McCoy, for an album titled *Who I Am*. By the time it and a single called "Walk Away from Love" came out in October, McCoy was a far bigger name than David Ruffin, having unleashed a monster summer hit with the elegantly infectious disco anthem "The Hustle." "Walk Away from Love," done in the same lushly stringed style, left room for an astonishing Ruffin vocal that escalated so high and far on the musical scale that his harrowing vows to renounce love "before love breaks my heart" took the song into operatic psychodrama.

But it was only a temporary reprieve. McCoy, in two more albums, couldn't repeat the magic, and in 1977 Ruffin finally got the courage to sever ties with Motown, signing with Warner Brothers and releasing two failed albums—learning, as had Eddie, that perhaps their spotty solo careers weren't all Gordy's doing after all. By almost eerie coincidence, David's voice was nearly gone as well, just as pulverized by cigarettes, booze, and coke. What's more, after suffering bronchial problems since his sickly childhood, all that crap had given him asthma.

Somehow he could still hit those famous Ruffin high notes, but only on a good day, and if he could do it in one take.

Then there was *his* mental condition. As good as he had always been at ignoring—or pretending to—all the disorder in his life, it was never as messed up as it had become by the early eighties. Within a few years, Joy, after he had slapped her, left him and went back to her native England, and he was the old bounder again, playing the pimp, living bed to bed, hand to mouth, and according to Genna Sapia—whom he would periodically pop in on to visit his son—with not an ounce of caution. As she put it, “He pursued married women—the crazier and more powerful the husband, the better. He messed with anybody and everybody. He threw motor oil all over the walls of the living room of a drug dealer he owed—anything for that dance of danger.”

Neither was he fazed that the IRS hit him up for a \$50,000 tab for unpaid taxes in 1976 when royalties poured in for “Walk Away from Love. He had leased his-and-hers Cadillacs for him and Joy, which would soon be repossessed, and formed a soon-defunct production company called Druff. Now he had no way to pay the debt. Out of guilt, he was always able to scrounge up a few bucks to send to David Jr. or to his mother Earline back home in Mississippi. But his record sales had dried up and whatever he would make from an occasional concert or *Soul Train* appearance went into a crack pipe, and still he expected lawyers he couldn’t pay to make all his woes go away. He was, Genna said, “living in a world with an all-encompassing bubble over it—‘Ruffinland.’”

Under the bubble, he was becoming unstrung, betraying other hidden guilts. One was how he had mistreated Tammi Terrell and in the process lost, as he came to believe, the only woman he ever loved. He was mortified by the crazy notion some believed that his abuse had caused her brain tumor. Sometimes Genna would find him in tears crying out her name and recalling precious memories about her. Once, finding some old keepsakes from when he lived with Genna, they both broke down, but Genna realized “we weren’t crying about the same thing. His were shed for Tammi Terrell. She was long dead, but obviously not forgotten.”

What tortured him most, however, was his irrelevance. He would blanch when people would say, “Didn’t you used to be David Ruffin?” As Genna says, “David had no idea what was going to happen to his career—what was to become of him. He was scared. He was scared and he used cocaine—a dangerous combination.”

And the Band Played On

When the Temptations started up again at Motown, Gordy had another egocentric producer ready to work with them—himself. Indeed, the first song he wanted them to cut, “Power,” Gordy had cowritten with Motown hand Angelo Bond for the Motown teen funk group DeBarge but held it back, so the story goes, knowing the Temptations would be back. After they recorded it, Gordy and Bond produced an album by the same name, with the single, a derivative but catchy dance number anchored by Marvin’s cyclical regurgitation of the word “power” and a Whitfield-type message mocking political hucksters, restoring them to the pop chart (No. 43) and a high rank on the R&B (No. 11) in the spring of 1980. Again, it was as good as could be expected, and a long step up from the Atlantic misfire. What’s more, it even made the graybeard Temptations semi-outlaws when after race riots in Miami the song was pulled from some radio stations for being too incendiary. “Yeah,” Otis says with a laugh at the absurdity of it, “we were the original ‘niggas with attitude.’”

Power had some tracks with that quality, one being their self-written ballad “Can’t You See, Sweet Thing.” However, the Tempts *were* getting

long in the tooth for Prince-era funk, and seemed no better off doing it at Motown than at Atlantic. The next two singles—the second, “Take Me Away,” from the soundtrack of the movie *Loving Couples*—only made the R&B chart, barely. Gordy called in yet another esteemed Philly producer, Thom Bell, to produce the follow-up album *The Temptations*, and Bell smartly went against the grain, casting it as light pop-soul stripped of the now too familiar funky guitars and cymbal-churning disco accents. But Bell was another savant who could not, Otis says, “capture the trademark Temptations sound,” and the LP fared even worse—No. 119 pop, No. 36 R&B in the fall of 1981.

This is when the reality dawned on them that in order to turn the clock forward, they’d have to reset it, even if just with a gimmick that would cause a great stir. After years of stagnation and meek sales, the more Otis thought about it, the concept of a Temptations reunion seemed less of a bad idea.

Actually, the idea had stayed on the burner in Philly. Kenny Gamble had moved past it, but a promoter and former DJ named Jimmy Bishop, who knew of Gamble’s failed attempt, had occasionally called Otis asking for the same chance to make it happen. Otis said he’d keep an open mind, and Bishop went about working David and Eddie. Late in 1981, he called again, with news that he had gotten David and Eddie to commit to the project, mainly out of desperation.

The timing did seem right, with David and Eddie on the skids and the Tempts close behind. Otis and Melvin agreed to it, springing the news at a Temptations show in Lake Tahoe when they brought David and Eddie onstage to a thunderous ovation. Otis himself was wary, but things were moving fast, maybe too fast, since as he recalls, people at Motown, as well as David and Eddie, were thinking of the reunion as an audition for a permanent rapprochement. Understandably, this made Leonard and Street nervous: while all seven past and present group members were in on the reunion, two would need to go afterward.

Despite the complications, Gordy and Shelly Berger, who had resumed as their manager when they returned and now had his own agency allied with Motown, were all for it, for purely commercial reasons. Gordy loved gimmicks that underlined the Motown “family” mien, and this was a gimmick in excelsis. Going with it, Gordy asked Smokey

Robinson to write and produce two tracks (“Backstage,” “More on the Outside”), and Barrett Strong wrote another (“You Better Beware”). Getting Norman Whitfield to produce would have made a lot of sense and a perfect symmetry, but he gave the job to Rick James, on the strength of the latter’s 1981 monster punk-funk smash “Super Freak,” on which the Tempts sang backup, famously cued by his “Temptations sing!” exhortation.

But James was hamstrung from the start here by far less piquant songs, and more so when he found that David and Eddie were not up to the frantic, screaming funk-blues he was laying down, complete with his Punk Funk horn section and Mary Jane Girls backup singers, and joining in himself on several tracks. Dennis would sing lead on six of the seven tracks, Ruffin one, Kendricks none (the 1994 CD reissue of the LP added two more tracks fronted by Edwards), which would raise the hackles of Temptations fans unaware of how dissipated David and Eddie were, their vocals on the album buffed by studio trickery.

Rehearsals for the tour, in an L.A. church basement, were without incident but at times uncomfortable. David and Eddie, probably biting their lips, even *thanked* Otis for riding their asses so hard in the past, which floored him. But he was floored too when one day Eddie, saying something he’d obviously wanted to for years, told him that when he and David left, “the group should have stopped.” Otis let it go, wondering not if he should have to defend having carried on the group but, knowing how they felt, how long it would be before he’d have to do it again.

The reunion tour began in mid-March 1982 in L.A., a week ahead of the release of *Reunion*—the cover had them all in tuxes around a taxicab, not, as Otis wanted, a Rolls-Royce—and the Rick James composition “Standing on the Top,” billed as “The Temptations Featuring Rick James,” as the first single, its nearly ten minutes of funk split into sides A and B. Live acoustics, less revealing of flaws, reliably made them sound fabulous, and these shows were no different. Both David and Eddie could always slay a house, which they did show after show. The usual set list would include not just the oldies but goodies but also reliable crowd-pleasing numbers like “Ol’ Man River,” and a three-song tribute to Paul Williams—“Try to Remember,” “For Once in My Life,” and “The Impossible Dream”—was always highly emotional. They

looked great, fit, tempting as ever. Sometimes David even managed a microphone toss or a labored split. Almost every show was a sellout. The reviews were raves. Money was rolling in hand over fist.

But, as if anyone were surprised, David was threatening to ruin it all. Even early on, Otis says, "I felt as if I was watching a rerun of a bad movie." At every stop, David was surrounded by revolving leeches and scumbags. He was doing coke nonstop. When they got to Detroit the third week, David, his pockets filled with cash and knowing where all the crack houses and dealers in the county were, missed the first show . . . then the second . . . then the third—which, because tour promoters had specified that all seven Temptations had to appear at each show or be docked, cost them thousands of dollars and earned them boos from the audience when they went on as a sextet. Not knowing where David even was, Otis appealed to Eddie to deliver a message to him: that if he didn't get his ass in gear, "both of you guys can forget this reunion going on after this tour." But in a measure of how cursed the tour was, Eddie and Dennis were at times draining the coke pipe with David.

If the message was ever delivered, David was beyond caring, the sickness of it being that Genna believed that beyond making money to score coke, David had agreed to the tour only for Eddie's sake. "You got the feeling," she said, "that David was happily, unobtrusively, carrying his pal Eddie." Yet here he was, putting Eddie in jeopardy and making the tour, as Otis puts it, "an exercise in torture." Now knowing it had been a very bad idea, he set up an emergency meeting with Motown president Jay Lasker, at which David and Eddie launched into their usual blather about not wanting to be treated "like kids." Lasker responded in kind with what Otis recalls as "something truly rude" that offended him as well, at which point David and Eddie stormed out. Lasker then announced, "We aren't working with them after this," though he and Gordy were quite content to go on taking the money earned by a pop Top 40 album and a No. 6 R&B single.

Shortly after, Berger chimed in. Doing Motown's bidding, he told the media that the tour would not continue if Ruffin and Kendricks were to stay. Inexplicably, he slammed poor Eddie the most, avoiding Ruffin's drug use to say, cruelly, that "Eddie's voice is shot." But then Berger was given his opinions by Gordy, and it was Eddie who had always given Berry a hard time. Somehow, they made it intact through

the last date, in late November at New York's Westbury Music Fair, but after Christmas Otis called Eddie and told him the reunion gig was over—forever.

As it happened, foreseeing just what would occur, David and Eddie had discussed provisional plans to go out on their own, where they wouldn't be overshadowed by nonentities, as they saw all the other Tempts save for Dennis. But it had to wait because Ruffin had pushed his luck too far in dodging the IRS. Clearly, he thought Motown would handle it for him. One story, possibly with David as the source, was that Motown tried to bail him out by offering him a solo album that would go to paying off his debt, but they wanted it recorded during the tour for a quick release and he refused because that would have been too rushed and too stressful. Another was that Motown exerted some influence to keep the IRS at bay during the tour, then when it ended, he was on his own.

More plausible was that David himself, living each day high to high, simply didn't care about tomorrow, and when tomorrow came it was too late to do anything. Even when he went to court for the final dispensation of the case, he still believed Motown would make it right. Instead, fined \$5,000 and sentenced to six months in a minimum-security federal prison in Indiana, he came out bug-eyed and screaming, "They're not gonna do this to me again!"

It only got worse. While in stir, he got word that a house he had bought on Parkside Street in the early 1980s had been foreclosed and, not for the first time, his furniture and other belongings tossed on the street and looted by scavengers before his brother Jimmy and David's latest squeeze, a willowy blonde named Debbie Rhone, got there to save a few items and put them in storage. Yet being kept off coke in the "country club" atmosphere of the prison, he actually lived more productively and seemed far happier. As Gemma said, "I was sure he welcomed the break in the struggle for daily room and board on the outside." According to Temptations flunky Tony Turner, he worked in the greenhouse, "where he could pass his days watering the plants and taking naps," and also made clocks in an arts and crafts workshop. He even sang at a couple of shows for the inmates. Every day he read his Bible, somehow seeking deliverance, though perhaps not from temptation.

He was sprung after four months, to move in now with Debbie, who worked as a barmaid, in a mobile home in rural Green Oak Township near South Lyon, in downstate Michigan. A *Detroit Free Press* reporter who found him, wrote, “[The trailer]’s parked behind an unfinished house/horse barn; parked nearby is the skeleton of an old, round Cadillac. Like Ruffin, it has seen better days.” Yet in these less than splendid surroundings, he found some peace for a while. There was a horse farm nearby and he was allowed to ride the nags. Friends who visited him during that time swore he was clean, healthy, nearly ascetic. But how long could *that* possibly last?

Eddie too was idle, back in Birmingham and mostly embargoing contact with old friends in the business and his children back in Detroit. Like David, he had no record contract—Motown having terminated both after the reunion tour—but the ovations for the two of them during those seven dizzy months did not fade, and wanting more of them would rouse them from their slumber.

The Tempts happily went back to their classic soul/oldies niche, with uneven results. The next album, *Surface Thrills*, produced by Dennis Lambert, whose commercial pop-soul with the Four Tops’ “Ain’t No Woman (Like the One I’ve Got)” and the Commodores’ “Night Shift” was less sweet soul music than elevator music—or, as Otis calls it, “the ‘white rock’ sound.” Ironically, applying it to the Tempts put the LP and one of its singles, “Love on My Mind Tonight,” in the R&B Top 20 in early 1983 but nowhere on the pop chart.

By the end of the year, the group had another new member—Ron Tyson, whom Otis happily hired after Glenn Leonard, whom Melvin couldn’t stand and who had recently begun missing shows, Ruffin-style, was let go—and a new/old motif when Gordy revived Norman Whitfield for the next album, *Back to Basics*. Whitfield produced five tracks, some written by his son Norman Anthony Whitfield, in a sweatier, retro-sixties style, but despite this “reunion part deux” theme, the LP slid a bit, just making Top 30 R&B, its Tyson-fronted single “Sail Away” going to No. 54 pop, No. 13 R&B in early 1984.

More edifying for the group was, as ever, touring, which they began to do in 1983 as a sort of traveling buddy act with the Four Tops. Borrowing on the lucrative lessons of the reunion tour, Motown saw

another reunion mechanism when the Tops returned after a decade at ABC Records. While the Tempts got back with Whitfield, the Tops did the same with the Holland brothers, setting up a "T 'n' T" tour that could promote both albums. The nostalgic appeal of the two most famous male groups would fuel a three-year trek around the world, and could be gleaned by the Temptations-Tops "battle of the bands" shtick on Gordy's self-aggrandizing *Motown 25* anniversary TV special in May 1983.

The show, one of the highest-rated of the year, revealed all too well Gordy's vindictive thirsts, his having invited Linda Ronstadt and, bafflingly, English rocker Adam Ant to bask in the Motown light but *not* Ruffin and Kendricks—or, for that matter, other once revered Motown names like the Marvelettes and the Contours, or any of the Funk Brothers. One of the latter, James Jamerson, had to buy his own ticket and watched from the balcony that night, only weeks before he died in obscurity. It also was one of Dennis Edwards's final appearances before his *second* firing late in the year for continued drug-induced derelictions.

He was replaced now by Detroit native Ali Ollie Woodson, who not only possessed the same kind of growling baritone as Dennis but bore a strong facial resemblance to him—and to Ruffin's cobra-like physique—and could also play piano and synthesizer. Woodson made his debut on their October 1984 album *Truly for You*, when through the revolving doors came Earth Wind & Fire members Al McKay and Ralph Johnson as coproducers (Suzee Ikeda was listed as executive producer), along with Earth Wind & Fire session musicians like Johnny Graham and Dean Graham on guitar and Ronnie Foster and Jerry Peters on keyboards—and, with exquisite aesthetics, James Jamerson Jr. on bass.

As with the previous dips into other soul music pools, however, the jazzy shadings and chirping falsettos more reminiscent of Philip Bailey than Eddie Kendricks weren't really the Tempts, and the album struggled to make Top 30 R&B and flopped on the pop. Still, Woodson, a magnificent singer with a voice that could by turns demand and softly yearn, and himself capable of effortlessly stretching a deep note into a falsetto bray, was a revelation. He injected the group with a shot of vocal B12, especially on the single "Treat Her Like a Lady," which he wrote with Otis, crafting it into a perfect, poppy eighties dance groove

that went to No. 2 R&B and Top 50 pop late in 1984, proving vividly that the Temptations could still kick some heavy tail.

As for Dennis, this dismissal, like the last, coincided with his renewed desire to record solo. In fact, with Gordy having acceded to him moonlighting, he had already recorded an album aimed at the then limited hip-hop crowd, producing—or perhaps *over*producing—the loud and layered tracks himself, and cowriting several tracks. “Don’t Look Any Further,” a duet with Motown singer Siedah Garrett cowritten by Dennis Lambert, went No. 2 R&B in the spring and later was sampled by the likes of Snoop Dogg, TLC, Tupac Shakur, Lauren Hill, and Lil Wayne. In 1998, Edwards would record a new version with the Weather Girls. Another single, “(You’re My) Aphrodisiac,” was also a dance club favorite, and a follow-up LP in 1985, *Coolin’ Out*, yielded a similarly well-received song in the title track.

But the string ran out there. Gordy was preparing to sell off Motown. The deal, with MCA and Boston Ventures, would go down in 1988 for \$61 million, with Gordy actually selling short, and a cost-cutting wave killed any more vanity projects like these. Thereafter, Dennis would do some performing, but mostly he waited for the inevitable call from Otis to come back again. Even he seemed to know that he could check out of the Temptations, but could never leave.

As sick of the business as Eddie was, singing was in his blood, even if not as perfectly formed in his throat now. More urgently, by late 1984, not having sung for two years while he lived as a hermit in his mother’s house in Birmingham, he was flat broke—he had practically given Pat everything he had when they divorced in the late 1970s, including their home—and seriously thinking about a comeback. Since he well knew that all of those same factors applied to the man with whom he was so strongly harnessed, his path was carved for him: back to Detroit, and to David Ruffin.

Late in 1984, he made the first move, accepting second billing for a New Year’s Eve show headlined by Mary Wilson at the Premier Theater. Many came just to see him, having heard rumors that he was in bad shape, but saw an elegant and happy Eddie—now calling himself, as in a kind of rebirth, by his actual surname of Kendrick—sing as sprightly and romantically as ever, to their great relief. At midnight, as Eddie

and Mary counted down to the new year and began singing "Auld Lang Syne," he recognized one patron sitting at a table quietly keeping to himself, and announced, "David Ruffin is in the house!" In years past, David would have been on the stage before the last word was out, but he held back until nearly carried up there by wildly screaming patrons, a far sadder sight than Eddie. But once the band struck up "My Girl," he was back in the sixties, the weight of half a decade lifted from him, tearing out the song he had made immortal.

Before long, Eddie and David had worked out the details of their own "reunion" tour, billed as the "Former Lead Singers of the Temptations." Motown was not happy with this, but with Gordy out it had a fraction of its old power to prevent such copyright infringements. Small-time promoters who either didn't know or didn't care how risky it was putting money behind David Ruffin booked them through the South and up through the Midwest, mostly in small towns at small clubs. Their singing was not very good, but they could pretend they were kings. Sometimes they had to threaten small-time rip-off promoters' lives to get paid, but they had enough to have their own white stretch limo, and their own manager. And of course, within days, as Tony Turner said, "just about everyone was partying, laughing, drinking, and getting high." David had also had an ugly run-in in Texas with Martha Reeves, who was making her own comeback after several nervous breakdowns. When a haggard Reeves said she was leaving the tour, David scorched her, calling her a "sick in the head bitch" and a "fuckin' nut," then ragged her to the audience.

But at least he made all the shows and never cheated anyone who paid to see him. And a greater reward followed in May 1985, courtesy of Daryl Hall and John Oates, whose blue-eyed Philly soul-pop was all over the radio and on the new music medium called MTV. Hall and Oates were about to headline a benefit concert for the United Negro College Fund at the newly active Apollo Theater, where one could almost hear ghostly echoes of the Temptations in the corridors. The show would be recorded as an album called *Live at the Apollo*. Having revered the Temptations—when he started in the business Hall had been tight with Paul Williams, who gave him one of his stage outfits—the duo sought out Otis a few weeks before, when the legendary theater reopened with a televised *Motown Returns to the Apollo* show, and proposed that the Tempts again reunite for one night to back them up.

Quaking at the thought of another reunion, even for one night, Otis declined. But Hall and Oates were really only interested in Ruffin and Kendrick anyway, and when they found them in the audience—again kept from a place on a Motown show—they made them the same offer, which was promptly accepted.

Live at the Apollo, which carried the subtitle “With David Ruffin & Eddie Kendrick” and featured a cover of all four of them in tuxes on the historic stage, led off with an extended David and Eddie medley of “Get Ready”/“Ain’t Too Proud to Beg”/“The Way You Do the Things You Do”/“My Girl.” After the album was released in late September, to go gold and hit No. 21 on the pop chart, the label, RCA, issued as a single a truncated version of the medley, with the latter two tunes, and it went Top 20, something the Temptations hadn’t done for years. David and Eddie were now running as an entry with Hall and Oates. They also appeared with them at the massive Live Aid concert in Philadelphia in July, another for the restoration of the Statue of Liberty, and on the MTV Video Music Awards. Later in the year, RCA released *Ruffin & Kendrick*, an album of soft, retro-style R&B produced by Hall and Oates that—though David raised his usual stink about not having control of the work, and Eddie bitched about his songs being rewritten by Oates—would sell over 100,000 copies, and today stands as the last original songs either would record.

This whirlwind left both David and Eddie with their good names back and a boatload of money. Yet for David, as usual, all it meant was that he had more to blow on coke, killing himself more and leaving him busted. He entered a drug rehab program in Detroit, but out of his mind for more blow, he beat and held up a guy with a stolen Colt .32 caliber handgun. After his arrest he pleaded no contest in May 1986 and, after insisting he hadn’t had a drug problem since 1967 and had just gone on a “binge,” got off easy with a fifty-dollar fine and a hundred dollars in court costs. He was put on probation, and the assault and battery charges were dropped.

Eddie, back in Birmingham, had little to do during those months but wait for David to get his shit together for the umpteenth time so they could go out on the road again and make another album. Meanwhile, his health grew worse, with him coughing up all sorts of mucus from his lungs and too short of breath at times to be able to keep his voice primed. He’d shake his head in puzzlement, then light up another unfiltered Camel.

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Although Otis was always painted in broad strokes by David and Eddie as a Gordy footstool and petty tyrant immunized by Motown from life's pain and pitfalls, he actually suffered more than they could ever know in the summer of 1985. The Tempts were playing an engagement in Atlantic City, rehearsing their moves with the former Motown stage coach Maurice King, when road manager Ken Harris came into the hotel ballroom, his face grim. Seeing him so dour, Otis joshed, "Damn, Ken, is it that bad?" Not knowing how else to say it, Harris took him aside.

"Otis," he told him, "Lamont is dead."

It was almost a replay of the terrible moment during that ill-fated 1970 Copacabana run when he learned Haze had died, and in many ways worse. His son and only child was just twenty-three. Recently Otis had gotten closer to him, making up for years of separation. He'd sent him money to buy a car, counseled him about problems he was having with Jo. Having gotten a job as a construction worker in Detroit, Lamont had been working that day on a building and fallen from the roof, fatally. As he had with Haze, Otis had spoken with him only the night before, something he kept muttering as he walked numbly to his room, comforted by the other Temptations. He flew back to Detroit to bury his boy, and it would take him months not to feel dead inside.

Perhaps partly as therapy, he began to write his memoirs with rock journalist Patricia Romanowski. The result was the 1988 memoir *Temptations*, which if it helped ease his inner pain caused more of it when old wounds became deeper, since he dealt unflinchingly with Ruffin's drug use and other bad behavior, as well as the group's constant turmoil. For many, as well, it was the first time they learned that one of the Temptations had killed himself. David and Eddie were treated harshly, which further hardened old grudges and confirmed to them their assumption that Otis had been on a power trip from the start.

It also posed a ticklish situation when the Temptations late that year received word of their inevitable reward, such as it was, of being inducted into the fourth class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Because the six core members of the cast would be honored, and each allowed brief speeches, who knew what David might burble? As Otis pondered the possibilities, he found himself wishing, for the first time,

that David Ruffin *would* miss a show. Fat chance, though. David would have ridden a mule to the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom on that January 18 rather than forgo taking a bow before the fat-cat industry crowd. That, he figured, was the mark of *legitimacy* that no one could take from him, least of all Otis. Then too, Hall and Oates, who would be elegizing and introducing the group, would not have done it without David and Eddie being there. In fact, it was iffier for Melvin, whose condition had worsened to the point that his doctor advised him to stay home and rest; but he too would have crossed an ocean to get there.

Still, neither excommunicated Temptation was seen until minutes before the ceremony when they strolled in, looking natty in their tuxedos, Eddie in a beard, David—on his forty-eighth birthday—thin as a swizzle stick, massive Cazal sunglasses swallowing his face. A tale later told by Tony Turner, with David as the source, was that they were late because they had been backstage sharing a crack pipe with Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, who were also inducted that night along with Otis Redding, Phil Spector, Dion, and David's first real inspiration, the Soul Stirrers. Dennis, however, who was with David before the proceedings, says, "Uh-uh, they weren't high that night. David was sober—at least he was when I saw him. What he did afterward, I don't know."

They sat at their own table, not the one occupied by the Temptations—Richard and Ron would have performed with the group in case David and Eddie didn't show—and nothing was said across the divide. But when the six honorees came to the podium, the initial cold stares and wary glances quickly melted and they began to let their guard down and hug each other with emotion, for once tasting only the sweetness, not the bitterness, of their shared past, though as always with the Temptations there was a telltale melancholy, even pity, about them. While they all had made it this far, time had been kind to none of them. For David, Eddie, and Melvin, the thought may have occurred that tonight would be life's last favor.

Receiving their laurels one by one, each came forward to accept his tribute, with affectingly sentimental remarks about what had been. Otis waited no further than the first sentence to say, "I wish Paul Williams were here to share in this honor." Dennis echoed that Paul was an "inspiration" and said, "I thank God I'm a part of this unit," a statement soon made ironic. Melvin cited chapter and verse from Deuteronomy about "the greatness of thy hand, thy mighty hand," as

in the Temptations' metaphorical fingers. David semicoherently said, "I really hope that somewhere in your heart we put a little love . . . and a thought remains . . . from the endurance that we've been through through the years . . . but this makes up for a lot of . . ." Then, deciding this wasn't the time to complete that sentence, he concluded, "Thank God and thank the Temptations."

Finally, standing around a single microphone at the lectern, they broke into an impromptu and perfectly tight chorus of "Don't Look Back" to channel Paul, singing as he did, "Forget about the past now . . . Keep on walking and don't look back." It was a wan plea; even they knew that looking ahead would bring a world of hurt.

The Temptations, settling into a comfortable if hit-and-miss groove, had by now released eight albums in five years since returning to Motown, prolific for a superannuated group with perpetually changing lead singers that lived almost exclusively on the R&B charts—and high on them. They cruised into the Top 30 all but once, and into the Top 5 twice, with 1984's *Truly for You* and 1986's *To Be Continued* . . . , which also yielded the No. 4 R&B and Top 50 pop single "Lady Soul." Other Top 10 R&B singles came with "I Wonder Who She's Seeing Now" and "Look What You Started" from the 1987 LP *Together Again*, the title a nod to Dennis's second return to the fold. After Woodson had been canned for turning up late for shows, Otis called Dennis, who he said begged for the job, saying, "I need to be in this group. You need to help me get myself together." By now Otis had grown exasperated by such pitiful pleas by grown men.

"Jesus Christ, Dennis," he told him, "what am I, your surrogate father?"

Their endless permutations now seemed a kind of comical subtext. One never knew just who would be in the Temptations at any given time, nor did it matter. They were doubly blessed, for sure. As they became more and more an oldies act for aging baby boomers, their immense black fan base had bled down through several new generations, keeping them current, albeit in the narrowing corridor of classic soul, no matter the personnel. Indeed, they didn't leave the Waldorf without another change being made—one that finally let Dennis break the Temptations hex. He decided to hook up with David and Eddie in "Ruffin/Kendrick/Edwards: Former Lead Singers of the Temptations."

By the time they went out on the road, it had become a big deal, the trio backed by soul singers David Sea and former Impression Nate Evans on a steady schedule for the next three years with stops across America and in Europe. For Dennis, that requited a long-extant dream of cohabitation with Ruffin onstage, and he savored it. But he and Eddie lived on tenterhooks, just waiting for Ruffin to ruin it all.

Ruffin's euphoria had been short-lived, a high that like all the others wore off, leaving him to brood in silence, as he once had in song so publicly, about being "filled with gloom," day after day "locked up in my room." Over the summer of 1988, after another failed rehab stay, Detroit cops found cocaine on him and after slapping cuffs on him, as one observer described it, "brutally" threw him in jail. Convicted on possession and violation of probation—he'd been represented by a Legal Aid lawyer, unable to afford anyone else—he did another year in the can, though a crueller punishment for him may have been the churlish observation in the paper that "before joining the Temptations in 1963, he was largely unknown. Since leaving in 1968, he has been largely forgotten."

Again he did his time and went right back out on the hustings, with promises he wouldn't keep about staying clean. Both he and Dennis spent time in a fancy New York drug clinic during downtime from touring. And with Eddie now having sworn off drugs, it was *Eddie* now who assumed the "Otis" role, trying to hold the act together, something that became necessary when David again got to screwing things up for them. He was obviously back on the pipe, showing up tardy for shows, *when* he showed up. And as had been the case with the Tempts, because some promoters had specified in their contracts that he had to be there for the act to get paid, Edwards says, "Eddie and me would come off the stage and find out we'd given a free performance."

When they pulled into the Motor City—an always dangerous place for David to be—he came close to doing a return engagement in jail after being busted one night breaking into an old girlfriend's house looking for coke money. But this time Aretha Franklin stepped in to save his butt. Aretha, who'd been hanging around the group because she had a crush on Dennis, hired a pricy lawyer who got the charges dropped.

Another time, when they were supposed to be performing in New York with the Four Tops as special guests, the Tops came in from

Detroit. When they arrived, Levi Stubbs told Eddie and Dennis, "We know David's not here." When they asked how he knew that, Levi said, "'Cause we just saw him in Detroit." While riding to the airport, he said, "we saw him scrambling for crack on the corner. We think he was selling his Rolex." Turning back the clock, David even pulled his old crap. Coming late for a show at a supper club, he sat blithely at a table nibbling at some food, then when Eddie and Dennis sang the encore, leaped onto the stage. When he tried to clasp hands with Eddie in the normal end-of-show bows, Eddie angrily slapped it away.

Eddie was the one who had to lay into him now for his screwups, whereupon a belligerent David would blow up, yelping, "I'm sick of this group shit. I'm going solo"—something he never did, his fear of failure on his own never having subsided. It got to be too much for Eddie, who would nearly crack up as the tour went on, with as much money being lost as made because of Ruffin's absences. It got so bad that Eddie ordered David to go home and tried carrying on the act with just Dennis. David, floating again, went not to South Lyon but to Philadelphia, where he met a new woman he could drain, a blonde widow named Diane Showers. She had worked on local television and had a big house in West Philadelphia and the means to subsidize his elegant tastes, and David was often seen driving her snazzy Lincoln Continental—until he sold it for twenty dollars when he was jonesing for coke.

However, bookings for Eddie and Dennis were sparse and David was allowed to return early in 1991 in time for a major appearance in Las Vegas. To audiences hungry to see them and cherish the memory, even a raspy, croaking David and Eddie were a joy. The adulation for them can be heard in a recording made of one of the shows that was released three years later as *Live in Las Vegas* on the small Ten-Am label. But then the clock always seemed to stop dead when they had a microphone in hand and had at the old classics. The problem was, for David and Eddie both, that clock was running out, for David as if by a death wish.

Dennis could sense it. "I tried many times to talk some sense into the brother," he says with a sigh. "I tried to help him. We all did. But he just never got it, man. Or didn't want to."

Early in 1991, Ruffin/Kendrick/Edwards, in high gear, went overseas to play dates through Europe, in Yugoslavia, Vienna, Italy, and Amsterdam

before winding up in London. Booked by New York promoter Ruth Bowen, they would travel without a manager, and Eddie and Dennis, evidently in a burst of insanity, agreed to have David, David *Ruffin*, collect the money at each stop from the local promoter and hold it for them. So of course there was static. When Dennis and Eddie asked him for their cut, he'd say he didn't have any with him, it was in a safe place, he'd get it for them. Or that they could take what he owed them out of his earnings on the *next* tour—they were due to return to Europe on June 26, with a tour of Japan to follow—or else out of the advance money they would get if RCA went through on a Ruffin/Kendrick/Edwards album and a Ruffin autobiography, both of which were being negotiated.

Dennis, no longer much interested in reasoning with him, told a friend that Ruffin was “a crazy motherfucker” and “I don't know what we're gonna do with him.” When the tour ended, David stayed in London for a while. Eddie and Dennis came home, still empty-pocketed. They continued pushing him, long-distance, only to be told he was about to wire it to them. He never did that, either. When he returned in May, he landed in Philadelphia carrying with him a briefcase with \$40,000 in British traveler's checks. Apparently he didn't want to stay in Philly for long; word had it he would soon move to Las Vegas, this despite—or maybe *because*—he'd promised to marry Diane in January, not that she took it for a sure thing. “He walked in the line of fire,” Showers said later. “I asked his ex-wife and daughters a lot of times to have him committed somewhere for approximately two years. He usually denied that he was doing anything.”

Diane hadn't seen him in over a week when just after midnight on Friday, June 1, dressed in a lime green polo shirt, Hawaiian print shorts, and sneakers, his bulging briefcase under his arm, he got into a white stretch limo lent to him by a friend named Linster “Butch” Morrell, who owned a livery fleet. At the wheel, his driver Donald Brown cruised to a drab three-story row house on Viola and North 52nd Street in the Carroll Park section of West Philadelphia. Appearances aside, the Mercedes-Benzes, BMWs, Cadillacs, and limos parked all along 52nd Street were a giveaway that this was no ordinary ghetto abode. Rather, it was known to celebrities as the best crack house in town, where pharmaceutical-grade cocaine flowed like water. Clients spent so much time there that it was furnished with big-screen televisions, stereo equipment, even exercise bikes.

As Brown later recounted, he and David had for three hours smoked five—others would say ten—vials of crack in twenty-five minutes, an enormous load, before David said he wasn't feeling well and lay back on the sofa he was sitting on. Fifteen minutes later someone checked on him and found him unconscious, but still breathing. Brown picked him up and carried him to the limo and drove to the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. Parking in front of the emergency room entrance at around 3 A.M., Brown either yelled or honked his horn until several attendants came out. "This guy's in bad shape," he told them about the tall, bony man slumped in the backseat. Aided by Brown, they took him out and laid him on a gurney, finding fifty-three dollars in his pocket but no identification, Brown told them it was "David Ruffin of the Temptations," but offered nothing more. He then jumped into the limo and drove off, apparently not wanting to involve Morrell in any trouble, or to have to talk about David's partying—and his own—to the cops.

Inside the emergency room, doctors tried to revive David for nearly an hour, giving him heart massages and electroshock jolts, but nothing worked and they confirmed his death at 3:55 A.M. David Ruffin was finally trouble free, fifty years too late.

Almost immediately, word hit the street, with rumors and speculation filling a vacuum left by the slow response of the police, who did nothing in the way of investigation for several days. During that time no one even went to the crime scene to search the place, no dealers or witnesses were questioned, no evidence culled, no hard details were released to the media. In the void, a scenario developed that Ruffin's corpse had been dumped from a speeding car into the street and remained unidentified on a slab in the morgue for a *week*, which was presented as the truth when the *Temptations* TV movie came around seven years later, it apparently being enough for the producers to *assume* that Ruffin had died as he lived, like a pile of trash, and ignore that Otis in his book told how Donald Brown had driven him to the emergency room.

(For this and other grievances, such as the David character saying his mother had been a prostitute—which came as rather shocking news to Earline Ruffin—his daughters filed a defamation suit against the producers, who included the still Motown executive Suzanne de Passe, Shelly Berger, and Otis, though he had no say about the script.

But the suit was dismissed on grounds that, essentially, the tall tales weren't tall enough to be held liable.)

Some aspects of his death *were* curious. With as many people as he knew in town and all the leeches who congregated around him, it was indeed true, and pitiful, that no one *did* come forward to identify his remains, not even Showers, and he had lain in the morgue until FBI records with his fingerprints arrived from D.C. two days later. Another day later his daughters Nedra and Cheryl arrived in Philadelphia and claimed his body. Clearly, people were staying away for a reason—they were the wrong kind of people. But did one of them “speedball” him the way John Belushi’s drug dealer had nine years before, perhaps with malice aforethought? And did someone steal what had been left of the \$40,000 he came home with only days before—none of it was in the briefcase when it was found—or had he blown it all on an extraordinary binge that would have killed an elephant?

Another common speculation was that David, with his pharmacist’s knowledge of cocaine, could not possibly have taken that much coke—not that this has ever prevented some veteran drug users from going too far. But to Genna, who knew his instincts so well, it was cut and dried, the answer to the longtime riddle of not how he would die but only when. On that June 1, 1991, she said, “His heart just blew up from cocaine.” Eddie, too, had seen it coming. David, he told someone only weeks before, “will never get off drugs. He’s the devil incarnate.”

Dennis was one of those who saw more to it. “They killed him in that crack house,” he avers, not saying who. “Listen, David once told me he couldn’t get high, no matter what, his body had become immune. I saw that. So I think someone just kept giving him more. Someone wanted him dead. Sure, he took it, and that was his fault, but he never did that much at one time before like that.”

But Dennis will also allow that David may have this time loaded up, more passively doing what Paul had done to himself with a gun. “David fucked up, he knew he did. But he wasn’t an evil person. He just had so much stuff inside him. We had a heart-to-heart talk, it must have been within the last week before he died. He said, ‘Dennis, you’re lucky. You had a mother and a father when you grew up.’ He never did, his father put him out on the sidewalk when he was two years old. That messed his mind up. It was like he was pouring out his heart, like maybe he knew he was near the end.”

Some of the darker narratives, echoing Paul's death, included the usual nonsense about murder. But it did not take long for the "mystery" to be pieced together, as did the June 17, 1991, issue of *Newsweek*, for example, in an article titled "David Ruffin's Sad Finale," in which his death was called "an inglorious end for one of the fabled voices in pop music."

The autopsy that concluded Ruffin died because of an "adverse reaction to cocaine" and a "drug overdose" found no needle marks, discounting the speedball theory. Bruises on his chest and knees were related to his being dragged in and out of the limo. Donald Brown was soon cleared of any wrongdoing, and those who had been at the crack house who could be found—most scattered into the wind—were not charged with anything.

No one knew, or will ever know, if someone at that crack house had plied him with so much coke that it had the same effect as a gun fired into his brain. But the case was closed with the premise that, after decades of trying, David Ruffin had gone one hit over the line. Nor will it ever be known if he himself expected to die that night, or whether he ever thought about the impeccable and poignant harmony of dying in the same town where the only woman he may have ever loved had also taken her last breath. All anyone knew for sure was that the man's pain—his "certain glorious anguish," as Daryl Hall once defined what made Ruffin's voice what it was—had at last been eased.

Accompanied by Showers, Ruffin's body was shipped on June 5 to Detroit, where his son David Jr. and brother Jimmy had it taken to Swanson's Funeral Home. But the funeral was delayed because no one had enough money to foot the bill. Two days later, Michael Jackson agreed to pay all the costs, which came to \$7,000, and an Atlanta company that had made Martin Luther King Jr.'s casket donated one for David to be buried in. The requiem was held on June 11 at the New Bethel Baptist Church, with the burial to be in Woodlawn Cemetery, and as things coalesced, Ruffin in death was just as galvanizing and disorderly a figure as he was in life. First, the provocative Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan entered the fray, explaining that David had phoned him a while ago saying he wanted to learn more about Islam, and that he put in his will that Farrakhan would deliver the eulogy.

Farrakhan and his scowling, bow-tied bodyguards made for an uneasy atmosphere inside the steamy church as invitees arrived, many having flown in from all over the country, including all of the Temptations, Eddie, and Dennis, each with their own bodyguard. Outside, a mob of two thousand swarmed around celebrities getting out of limos to enter the church. A cop lost her gun during a melee. Someone reportedly had a finger severed in one of the church doors. Inside, many seats filled with gawking spectators who had been there early enough to be let in. As Eddie sat doubled over and sobbing, a woman crawled to the pew in front of him and snapped a picture. An inconsolable Mary Wilson looked up to see another stranger asking for an autograph.

Berry Gordy was not compelled to come, nor was Diana Ross—both sent flowers—but Gordy sent his sister Esther Edwards, who created more discomfort by taking a long bow on behalf of Berry, recalling all the generosity and aid he had given David, which surely made many mourners wonder whether David, if he'd been in his grave, would be spinning in it. Stevie Wonder was there, as were Smokey and the Miracles, Martha Reeves—despite what he'd called her in Texas—and Aretha Franklin, in the church where she'd sung as a child when her late father, Reverend C. L. Franklin, famously was the pastor there. All took turns paying tribute, Stevie and Aretha in song, the latter movingly accompanied by the church organ.

Melvin then came up to speak for the Temptations, beckoning them to follow him to the pulpit, where, next to the open casket, they sang “My Girl” a cappella, after which Melvin said, “As long as his memory lives in our hearts, he will be immortal. Let all of us pass his memory on to our children for generations to come, just as we have done for the late great Paul Williams and Marvin Gaye.”

During it all, the din outside could be heard, and the crashers in the house hollered for the singers as if at an Apollo Theater show, ruining the somber mood, though many suspected this impudence would have made David happy. As Genna said, it was “more like a sideshow—the best show that [Ruffin] had ever done.” When Farrakhan spoke, he scolded the crowd for their disrespectful behavior, essentially telling the celebrity-sniffers they could leave because they wouldn't get what he was about to say, which was, first, an antidrug screed. Citing a record label that he said David had told him sometimes paid him with drugs, he said, “I won't name the record label,” but went on to say that David

had told him he no longer wanted to be “a slave,” with everyone except possibly Esther Edwards assuming he meant Motown.

“We who are left behind,” he concluded, “must not clap our hands and weep and mourn, for he is out of trouble. You are still in it.”

That went literally for Eddie. The day was traumatic enough for him, but was made worse when two Wayne County sheriff's deputies, in a bush-league move designed to gain publicity, came into the church to arrest him for owing \$26,000 in delinquent child support to Pat, who had returned to Michigan. When Farrakhan was told, he brought the deputies to a side room and warned them that if they handcuffed Eddie, he would call them out from the podium, warning that “you will never get this man out of the church.” They agreed to wait until the service was over, leaving Eddie to ponder his impending arrest the whole time. When it happened, and he was taken away to stand before a judge, Martha Reeves frantically called Gordy, who wired \$10,000 for Eddie to make bail.

To Eddie, Gordy was doing him no favor—“It’s nothing but some of my money back that he stole from me,” he said.

Eddie and Dennis carried on with an act refashioned as “The Reunion of the Temptations, featuring Eddie Kendrick and Dennis Edwards.” Having been booked before David died on a backbreaking tour through France, Belgium, Austria, Spain, Italy, and, crazily, civil-war-torn Yugoslavia, all places where the Temptations’ legacy was worshipped, Eddie and Dennis—especially after being gypped by David—had no intention of giving up those gate receipts, even though it meant traveling across the Continent in a rickety bus. But it was the last thing a sickly Eddie wanted to do. During the jag he was nasty, even arguing that the backup group was singing better on Dennis’s leads than on his. By the end of it, pissed off about everything, he’d stopped speaking to everyone.

If he was very un-Eddie-like, it may have been because he knew he was dying. As wary of doctors as he was, he didn’t need to figure out why he could no longer sing without coughing up blood or feel his lungs burning, and why he was down to around 130 pounds. He hoped, against hope, that going back to Birmingham and resting up would prove him wrong. Once there, he used the money from his recent touring

to buy the aging Miss Lee Bell a home, in which he stayed when he wasn't in Atlanta bunking with a girlfriend who lived there, and raising a young son. As with almost everything else of a personal nature in his life, he said little about either, and less about the day in November 1991 when he finally went to a doctor who confirmed the worst fears of his family and friends—he had lung cancer.

Within days he went in for an operation to remove a lung, and seemed to be doing well. He even got back on the road, touring steadily on his own through the following summer. As had Paul and later Melvin, he needed an oxygen tank to be able to breathe. But that he could sing at all was remarkable, and to those with him, singing was what was keeping him alive and feeling useful. He made it through tours of Europe and Japan, but came back very sick, and doctors at Birmingham's Princeton Baptist Medical Center found that the cancer had spread through his body. Soon he was bedridden, too weak to say more than a word or two at a time.

When word got out that he was close to the end, Otis flew to Birmingham in late September to bring closure to their prickly relationship. They hadn't spoken at length since the reunion tour—even at the Hall of Fame, Eddie had all but snubbed him. At his bedside, Otis, who was shocked by his frailness, didn't know how to say what he wanted to, but Eddie beat him to it, saying, "You know all that shit that went down between us? Well, that's just water under the bridge."

Says Otis, "We told each other, 'I love you, man,' and cried together. It was so sad that it had to be then, but that was when the Eddie I loved showed himself again, and it felt good to me that I could say goodbye to him with love. Eddie wanted it to be that way. He told me before I left him, and it was one of the last things he said, that he was ready for God to take him. He made his peace and he was happy."

A week later, on October 5, he too was gone. Once more the Temptations and Dennis had to bury one of their own. The funeral was held five days later at the First Baptist Church of Ensley—when he was in Princeton Baptist Medical Center he had been baptized—and like Ruffin's, it had its hairy moments too. Streets around the church were blocked and cops had to hold back surging crowds who snapped photos of arriving celebrities like the Temptations, the Four Tops, and Mary Wilson. Covering it, the *Birmingham News* wrote that "the atmosphere was as much of an awards gala as a funeral." But inside

the church there was none of the manic mayhem of New Bethel. The mood was dignified and, as Otis says, “joyous,” more like a New Orleans funeral, full of rhythm and proportion—again, an adieu reflecting the man. Eddie was buried in Elmwood Cemetery—a plaque from his headstone would be stolen some years later—not far from the smoking mills and soot of the Bottoms, where he and Poopie Williams had begun singing to stay out of trouble so long ago now, and near the park on Fourth Avenue North and 17th Street where the city put up a monument to him.

For Otis, the doleful experience of burying men who’d been like brothers wasn’t over. The worst one of all was when Melvin’s time came. By the 1990s, the Temptation about whom almost no one had ever had an unkind word was paying the piper for the years he’d conned himself into believing those cortisone shots were a panacea. Now he could neither walk without assistance nor breathe without an oxygen tank. During shows he’d sometimes need to sing while sitting on a stool, or miss a number or two while he gulped oxygen backstage. He was prone to infections that debilitated him further. Ever upbeat, he wanted no pity and chased away the worries everyone else had that he was walking *his* last mile, though Otis knew that “without a miracle, he could not go on much longer.”

He thought he might find one when the ageless Smokey Robinson hooked him up with his nutritionist and began a regimen of vitamins and herbs. During the summer of 1994, they went back on the road, but during a show in Connecticut at the Foxwoods Resort Casino, as he and Otis grasped hands before the opening number, Melvin’s felt cold and lifeless. Afterward he began to bleed from a leg infection and Otis took him to a hospital, where doctors diagnosed him with necrotizing fasciitis, an exceedingly rare deep tissue infection known in lay terms as “flesh-eating disease” for its rapid destruction of skin and muscle. In its most virulent form it has a 70 percent mortality rate, and treatment can involve amputation. Melvin’s was caught early enough to avoid that, but doctors had to peel back the skin on his arm and leave it open, his muscles and tendons fully exposed. Otis saw him that way in his hospital bed and is still shaken by it. And yet Melvin *still* wanted to go back on the road. That’s when Otis told him those days were over for him.

He did come in when the Temptations late in that year began to record their 1995 album *For Lovers Only*, an anthology of classic pop standards. He had sung on two tracks when Ali Ollie Woodson, in his second tenure with the group, noticed blood on Melvin's sock and Otis ordered him to go home. Ray Davis, who'd sung bass for Parliament-Funkadelic, was called in to finish the album, which would be the last one Melvin Franklin sang on. Within a week, on February 17, Kim called Otis to say that she could not wake Melvin up. Having had a seizure that morning, he was taken to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in a coma, and there was nothing the doctors could do. Another death watch began, and over the next week Otis periodically came by his bed. Though Melvin was comatose, Otis swears that at one point as he was speaking to him, his eyelids fluttered. "He knew what I was saying. I know it. He knew I knew it."

On the twenty-third Otis was on the way there again. By the time he arrived, Blue had suffered another seizure and was gone. (Replaying the scene, Otis would come to the same hospital thirteen years later to be by Norman Whitfield's sickbed days before he died.) The funeral was two days later at Forest Lawn Church of the Hills high in the dreamily hazy Hollywood Hills—a long, long way from the inner-city streets that had teemed for David and Eddie's last rites—and attracted the remnants of the old Motown power structure, including Berry Gordy and Smokey Robinson, who sang a song he had composed for the occasion, "I'll Really Miss You," as well as Michael Jackson. The Temptations sang a recent song of theirs, the heavily gospel "Broken Pieces." Melvin was then sent down in his grave in the Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery, with Kim and his four children and Otis standing by the pit of the grave—something that Otis would not be able to do again. "I just can't bear it," he says. "I can't bring myself to look at that stone. But I still talk to him. Every day."

As always, the Tempts soldiered on, Melvin's place filled by Harry McGilberry, who'd sung in the Philly soul group the Futures. Ali Ollie Woodson left in 1996 to battle throat cancer, and would occasionally be called on as a fill-in. Richard Street took *his* leave in 1993, not happily. Street's explanation was that he had emergency surgery to remove kidney stones, too suddenly to inform Otis, and with the Tempts having a show a few days later, Otis lit into him, with no sympathy for Richard, who

quit. Says Otis, "That's not how it happened. He can say whatever he wants, but Richard knows why I had to let him go." The gap was filled by Ron Tyson protégé Theo Peoples.

By 1997 the Temptations were down to Otis and four soul journey-men, Tyson, Peoples, Harry McGilberry, and Terry Weeks, yet when they performed in a Motown tribute on the halftime show of Super Bowl XXXII in 1998 in San Diego, they were riding on their biggest success in years. That happened when *Phoenix Rising*, coproduced by Otis and featuring some smooth riffs and a series of Otis "love raps," went No. 8 R&B and Top 50 pop, and its single, "Stay"—written and produced by Narada Michael Walden, fronted by Peoples, and cunningly sampling "My Girl" on the intro—put them back on the singles charts, going No. 1 for three months on the now very relevant (to them) adult contemporary list.

The LP would sell two million copies and be certified quadruple platinum, aided, as was their recent *Ultimate Collection* anthology album, by the unexpected popularity of the *Temptations* TV movie, which won its time slots both nights it was on, five Emmy awards, and sold thirty thousand copies of the home video. Two years later, *Ear-Resistible*, also coproduced by Otis, did a bit less in sales but its single, "I'm Here," notched the 2001 Grammy for Best Traditional R&B Vocal Performance. Still, mnemonic blips like that were gravy now. What mattered was that they could go on touring as many as three hundred days a year—a ritual that since the early sixties may well have been a labor of love but was beyond doubt an economic necessity.

One of their producers in the early nineties, Michael Sembello, recalls, "They came off the road to do a session. And it was just so sad. I mean, Melvin, he had such a big heart, here he was breathing with an oxygen mask and he's saying, 'Well, we gotta go play Poughkeepsie tomorrow.' That's the only way they could make any money because they'd been so ripped off by Motown and Berry Gordy. That's how fucked up Motown is, it's just sick. It was like that for all those great black singers. I sat a row in front of James Brown at some awards show one time, and I heard him telling Stephen Bishop, 'Man, all I ever got was ten thousand dollars and a Cadillac.' He had to make his money singing live. All those guys did, God bless 'em."

Indeed, their albums, while personally rewarding, were important now for the fact that around half of the songs were written by the

group. That was the payoff for the publishing rights they split with Motown as the company became a pigskin handed off from MCA to PolyGram to Seagrams to the Universal Music Group—though not with Gordy after 1997, the year he sold off his Jobete publishing empire for a staggering \$132 million. That presaged their second farewell to Motown nine years later, at least technically, when they moved to a Universal Motown offshoot, New Door Records.

That Theo Peoples left in 1998 to join the Four Tops and was replaced by Barrington “Bo” Henderson, and that Henderson was fired in 2003 by Otis—prompting an unsuccessful wrongful termination lawsuit—did not disturb the Temptations equation. As they stood in the new millennium, they had lurched through the death of hot wax and the birth of compact discs and digital files downloaded on space-age computers. And their brand was still so strong in the hinterlands that it was too profitable to leave to only one band of Temptations. Taking the cue from the “Legendary Voices of the Temptations,” other pseudo-Temptation spin-offs with the same and similar-sounding names—Dennis was first, with *The Temptations Review Featuring Dennis Edwards*, then Damon Harris with his own *Temptations Review*, followed by Ali Ollie Woodson & the *Emperors of Soul* (which sometimes included Paul Williams Jr.); Glenn Leonard and the *Temptations Experience*; the *Legendary Lead Singers of the Temptations* and the *Temptations Reunion Show* (both consisting of Glenn Leonard, Woodson, and Henderson); and Richard Street’s *Temptations*. All of them would feel the sting of an Otis Williams lawsuit for copyright infringement, and all save for Dennis’s group would dissolve, though some try and sneak in a one-night payoff here and there.

“Look,” Otis says, “I put my whole damn life into this group. I sweated a lot of sweat, bled a lot of blood, buried a lot of friends in this group. I have nothing against Damon Harris or Richard or any of those guys. But they can’t be taking food from my plate, you understand? I didn’t come all this way to share my baby.”

Dennis doesn’t begrudge him a bit. Having long ago lost his appetite to fight with Otis, he employs an oft-repeated descant among Motown folk, saying, “One thing you got to give Otis credit for, he was like a rock. He tried to keep it together. ‘Cause a lot of us, like me, I got the same feeling Eddie got, like, damn, we’re making somebody rich. I was too young, I was bitter. I thought I was carrying the load. I didn’t

see it the way he did, in a bigger picture. And he had every right to fire me those times, and I respect him for it. I was the one who was wrong. He was right."

Cornelius Grant's variation goes like this: "I have to give Otis a lot of credit, because had it not been set up that way, with Otis making the decisions, it wouldn't have lasted. It would have been chaos. Sometimes it *was* chaos. But out of it always came order. He was the only one who could've made the hard decisions. So he was kinda like the glue, and he still is."

Not everyone consecrates him, of course. For David's daughter Nedra Ruffin, the very mention of the sole surviving original Temptation sets her off. "Otis wrote a book and did a movie based on a bunch of dog-gone fiction!" she begins. "And for all that, he did not give my daddy's kids a dime. He blocked any profits from us. [In that way] he took millions from us. My daddy left us broke, man. We're just average persons trying to make it on a daily basis and meanwhile for the last seventeen years people have written things making money off my dad's name. And Otis, the only person he gave money to was Melvin's wife."

Having lost the lawsuit against the movie, she vows to keep fighting that fight. "I'm gonna talk to my attorney to see what we can do."

Then, changing gears on a dime, she asks, "Do we get profits off this book?"

After their final Motown album, the aptly titled *Legacy* in 2004, there would be more new faces—former Spinner G. C. Cameron and Joe Herndon—for their next album, *Reflections*, a collection of old Motown covers, one of which, "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You)," was nominated for the 2007 Grammy for Best Traditional R&B Vocal. For the next, *Back to Front*, this time with soul music covers, Cameron was out and burly baritone Bruce Williamson in. In the fall of 2009, they were about to go back in the studio for another. Without knowing much more about them, some truisms were a given: there's always a next Temptation, and always a next Temptations album, the newest, *We're Still Here*, released in May 2010.

And always a Temptations road trip, such as in the early spring of 2008. Even fewer people knew where the world was headed, but they were still going around and around—on this night headed from Durham, North Carolina, to Westbury, Long Island, in their private

Coach Line bus. Outside, as always, there were signposts and other reference points quickly gleaned from having passed this way before.

"See that?" Otis says, pointing to a low-hanging highway bridge on the New Jersey Turnpike. "One time we went under it and the top of the bus almost got sheared off. We coulda lost a couple of Temptations that night."

The destination, the Capital One Bank Theatre, held more memories—as the Westbury Music Fair, it was one of the places where David tried to commandeer the stage after he was fired. "He didn't make it," Otis notes. "We had the guards out." It was also where Otis and Eddie made a vow to keep the act together, no matter what. A bittersweet memory, to be sure.

Upon their arrival, their opening act, the Four Tops, were in mid-set, one of their first gigs since the death of Levi Stubbs. Backstage, the Tempts milled about in a tiny dressing room, Otis nibbling on a plate of cold chicken next to a rack with five black-and-white-striped shirts and five pairs of orange pants. Before donning them, Otis called the group together and, around a portable keyboard played by their musical director Bob Farrell, they began their long preshow ritual of singing two songs on the set list, "Ol' Man River" and "You Are Necessary in My Life (The Wedding Song)," from *Legacy*. Their harmonies were impeccable, mesmerizing, stopping time, and at that moment one could almost hear and feel ghosts in that room, named Ruffin and Kendricks. Satisfied, sixty-eight-year-old Otis Williams got up and put on his Temptations threads, which he readily admitted have grown through the years from thin and butt-highlighting to large and extra roomy, especially around the middle. As he ran his fingers over the sharp crease on his pants, he moved toward the door with a war cry—"We got a show to do."

A show that left the sold-out house of mostly fifty-and-ups stomping and singing lyrics known by heart. The moves were tight, the voices throaty, the energy high. There was shtick, too. At one point Otis bent over, hands on knees, feigning exhaustion.

"What's wrong?" asked Williamson, playing straight man.

"I'm tired," Otis said, breathing hard. "I been doin' this for forty-eight years!"

But the look on his face seemed to say he was only beginning.

Discography: The Temptations' Chart Hits

Sources: Billboard Hot 100 singles chart, *Billboard* R&B Top 40 chart, *Cashbox* R&B chart (November 1963–January 1965), *Billboard* album chart.

Catalog numbers refer to Gordy (1961–76); Atlantic (1977–79); Gordy (1980–87); Motown (1987–2004); New Do or (2006–present).

Singles

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title (Writing Credits)</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
7001	"Dream Come True" (Gordy)	3/62	(22)
7028	"The Way You Do the Things You Do" (Robinson/Rogers)	1/64	11 (1)
7032	"I'll Be in Trouble" (Robinson)	4/64	33 (22)
7035	"Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me So Blue)" (Whitfield/Holland)	8/64	26 (11)
7038	"My Girl" (Robinson/White)	12/64	1 (1)

(Continued)

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title (Writing Credits)</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
7040	"It's Growing" (Robinson/Moore)	3/65	18 (3)
7043	"Since I Lost My Baby" (Robinson/Moore)	6/65	17 (4)
	(B) "You've Got to Earn It" (Robinson/Grant)		(22)
7047	"My Baby" (Robinson/Moore)	9/65	13 (4)
	(B) "Don't Look Back" (Robinson/White)		83 (15)
7049	"Get Ready" (Robinson)	2/66	29 (1)
7054	"Ain't Too Proud to Beg" (Whitfield/Holland)	5/66	13 (1)
7055	"Beauty Is Only Skin Deep" (Whitfield/Holland)	8/66	3 (1)
7057	"(I Know) I'm Losing You" (Whitfield/Holland/Grant)	11/66	8 (1)
7061	"All I Need" (Wilson/Holland/ Taylor)	4/67	8 (2)
7063	"You're My Everything" (Whitfield/Penzabene/ Grant)	6/67	6 (3)
7065	"(Loneliness Made Me Realize) It's You That I Need" (Whitfield/Holland)	9/67	14 (3)
7068	"I Wish It Would Rain" (Whitfield/Strong/ Penzabene)	12/67	4 (1)
7072	"I Could Never Love Another (After Loving You)" (Whitfield/Strong/ Penzabene)	4/68	13 (1)
7074	"Please Return Your Love to Me" (Whitfield/Strong/Neely)	7/68	26 (4)

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title (Writing Credits)</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
7081	"Cloud Nine" (Whitfield/Strong)	10/68	6 (2)
Motown 1137	"I'm Gonna Make You Love Me" (Gamble/Ross) Diana Ross & the Supremes and the Temptations	11/68	2 (2)
7084	"Runaway Child, Running Wild" (Whitfield/Strong)	1/69	6 (1)
Motown 1142	"I'll Try Something New" (Robinson)	2/69	25 (8)
7086	"Don't Let the Joneses Get You Down" (Whitfield/ Strong)	5/69	20 (2)
7093	"I Can't Get Next to You" (Whitfield/Strong)	7/69	1 (1)
Motown 1153	"The Weight" (Robertson) Diana Ross & the Supremes and the Temptations	8/69	46 (33)
7096	"Psychedelic Shack" (Whitfield/Strong)	12/69	7 (2)
7099	"Ball of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)" (Whitfield/Strong)	5/70	3 (2)
7102	"Ungena Za Ulimwengu (Unite the World)" (Whitfield/Strong)	9/70	33 (8)
7105	"Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)" (Whitfield/Strong)	1/71	1 (1)
7109	"It's Summer" (Whitfield/ Strong)	6/71	51 (29)
7111	"Superstar (Remember How You Got Where You Are)" (Whitfield/ Strong)	10/71	18 (8)

(Continued)

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title (Writing Credits)</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
7115	"Take a Look Around" (Whitfield/Strong)	2/72	30 (10)
7119	"Mother Nature" (Zesses/Fekaris)	6/72	92
	(B) "Funky Music Sho' Nuff Turns Me On" (Starr)		(27)
7121	"Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" (Whitfield/Strong)	9/72	1 (5)
7126	"Masterpiece" (Whitfield)	2/73	7 (1)
7129	"Plastic Man" (Whitfield)	5/73	40 (8)
7131	"Hey Girl (I Like Your Style)" (Whitfield)	7/73	35 (2)
7133	"Let Your Hair Down" (Whitfield)	11/73	27 (1)
7135	"Heavenly" (Whitfield)	2/74	43 (8)
7136	"You've Got My Soul on Fire" (Whitfield)	5/74	74 (8)
7138	"Happy People" (Bowen/Baldwin/Richie)	11/74	40 (1)
7142	"Shakey Ground" (Bowen/Hazel/Bond)	2/75	26 (1)
7144	"Glasshouse" (Charlemagne)	6/75	37 (9)
7146	"Keep Holdin' On" (Holland/Holland)	1/76	94 (21)
7152	"Who Are You (And What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life)" (English/Leonard)	9/76	(22)
3436	"In a Lifetime" (Baker/Tyson)	10/77	(21)
3538	"Ever Ready Love" (Holland/Holland/Beatty)	11/78	(31)
7183	"Power" (Gordy/Bond/Mayer)	4/80	43 (11)

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title (Writing Credits)</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
7208	"Aiming at Your Heart" (Simmons/Jefferson/ Roebuck)	7/81	67 (36)
1616	"Standing at the Top—Pt. 1" (James) The Temptations featuring Rick James	4/82	66 (6)
1666	"Love on My Mind Tonight" (Beckett)	2/83	88 (17)
1720	"Sail Away" (N. A. Whitfield/ Bond)	1/84	54 (13)
1765	"Treat Her Like a Lady" (O. Williams/Woodson)	10/84	48 (2)
1781	"My Love Is True (Truly for You)" (O. Williams/Tyson/ Carstarphen)	2/85	(14)
1818	"Do You Really Love Your Baby" (Vandross/Miller)	10/85	(14)
1856	"Lady Soul" (Holden)	7/86	47 (4)
1871	"To Be Continued" (O. Williams/Woodson)	1/86	(25)
1908	"I Wonder Who She's Seeing Now" (Pardini/George)	8/87	(3)
1920	"Look What You Started" (Bunetta/Chudacoff/Holden)	12/87	(8)
1974	"All I Want from You" (Sheppard)	3/88	(16)
2004	"Special" (Sheppard/Varner)	11/89	(10)
2023	"Soul to Soul" (Doherty)	1/90	(12)
374-633-087-1	"Stay" (Walden/Fischer/ Urquhart)	9/98	(28) (also No. 1 on the adult contemporary chart)
012158216-1	"I'm Here" (Katrina Willis, Colin Morrison)	6/00	(40)

Albums

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
911	<i>Meet the Temptations</i>	3/64	95
912	<i>The Temptations Sing Smokey</i>	3/65	35 (1)
914	<i>The Temptin' Temptations</i>	11/65	11 (1)
918	<i>Gettin' Ready</i>	6/66	12 (1)
919	<i>Greatest Hits</i>	11/66	5 (1)
921	<i>The Temptations Live!</i>	3/67	10 (1)
922	<i>The Temptations with a Lot o' Soul</i>	7/67	7 (1)
924	<i>The Temptations in a Mellow Mood</i>	11/67	13 (1)
927	<i>The Temptations Wish It Would Rain</i>	4/68	13 (1)
Motown 679	<i>Diana Ross & the Supremes Join the Temptations</i>	11/68	2 (1)
Motown 682	<i>TCB (Diana Ross & the Supremes and the Temptations)</i>	12/68	1 (1)
938	<i>Live at the Copa</i>	12/68	15 (2)
939	<i>Cloud Nine</i>	2/69	4 (1)
933	<i>The Temptations Show</i>	7/69	24 (2)
Motown 692	<i>Together (Diana Ross & the Supremes and the Temptations)</i>	9/69	28 (6)
949	<i>Puzzle People</i>	10/69	5 (1)
Motown 699	<i>On Broadway (Diana Ross & the Supremes and the Temptations)</i>	11/69	38 (4)
947	<i>Psychedelic Shack</i>	3/70	9 (1)
953	<i>Live at London's Talk of the Town</i>	7/70	(5)
954	<i>Greatest Hits, Volume 2</i>	9/70	15 (2)
957	<i>Sky's the Limit</i>	4/71	16 (2)
961	<i>Solid Rock</i>	1/72	24 (1)
962	<i>All Directions</i>	7/72	2 (1)
965	<i>Masterpiece</i>	2/73	7 (1)

<i>Catalog Number</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Release Date</i>	<i>Peak Position (R&B)</i>
Motown 782	<i>Anthology</i>	8/73	65 (5)
966	<i>1990</i>	12/73	19 (2)
969	<i>A Song for You</i>	1/75	13 (1)
973	<i>House Party</i>	11/75	40 (11)
971	<i>Wings of Love</i>	3/76	29 (3)
975	<i>The Temptations Do the Temptations</i>	8/76	53 (10)
19143	<i>Hear to Tempt You</i>	11/77	113 (38)
19188	<i>Bare Back</i>	9/78	(46)
994	<i>Power</i>	4/80	45 (13)
1006	<i>The Temptations</i>	8/81	119 (36)
6008	<i>Reunion</i>	4/82	37 (2)
6032	<i>Surface Thrills</i>	2/83	159 (19)
6085	<i>Back to Basics</i>	10/83	152 (30)
6119	<i>Truly for You</i>	10/84	55 (3)
6164	<i>Touch Me</i>	11/85	146 (20)
6207	<i>To Be Continued . . .</i>	6/86	74 (4)
6204	<i>25th Anniversary</i>	10/86	140 (55)
6246	<i>Together Again</i>	9/87	112 (12)
6275	<i>Special</i>	8/89	(25)
6331	<i>Milestone</i>	11/91	(88)
37450568	<i>For Lovers Only</i>	9/95	(43)
3145305622	<i>The Ultimate Collection</i>	11/97	13 (60)
3145309372	<i>Phoenix Rising</i>	8/98	44 (8)
0121577422	<i>Ear-Resistible</i>	5/00	54 (16)
4400163302	<i>Awesome</i>	12/01	140 (27)
B00006580T	<i>My Girl: The Very Best of the Temptations</i>	4/02	(60)
B000258902	<i>Legacy</i>	6/04	(18)
B000517002	<i>Reflections</i>	1/06	(14)
009451	<i>Back to Front</i>	10/07	(19)

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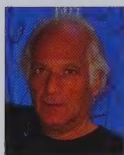
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